STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS
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THE ARK OF MARS
a novel of infinite worlds by LEIGH BRACKETT
also ROBT. MOORE WILLIAMS - JAMES McKIMMEY - HAYDEN HOWARD

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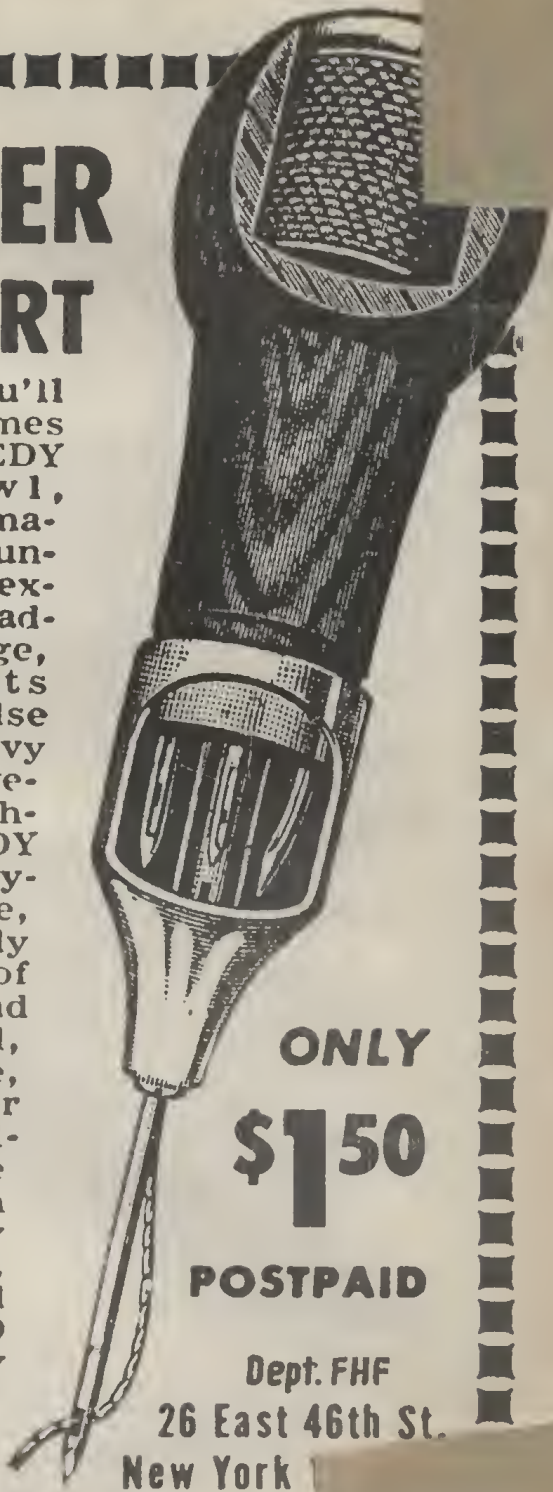

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VOL. 6, No. 2 • A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE • SEPTEMBER, 1953

Novel of Distant Worlds

THE ARK OF MARS . . . . . ***Leigh Brackett*** **74**

There are men in space again. The word spread aut from Mars; from damp Venus and frosty Mercury; ta the lunar colanies af Jupiter and Saturn. To all points of the system the warning was screamed: *Halt thase fleeing star-pilgrims . . . . those mad space-sons of the Ark of Mars.*

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Have yau ever seen a dead mahute, or even one that was ill? Or anything that laaks like a graveyard? Tang and Lutscher knew not the answer . . . . but maybe Bunzo, the clober, knew.

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PREVIEW OF PERIL . . . . . ***Alfred Coppel, Jr.*** **45**

Through the patrol cordans af the powerful Martian Space Force slipped the space ships of Flotilla Blue Three. Only the crazy luck of their mad, medal-bedecked Commodore would ever see them out again.

WHERE SEX MET SPACE . . . . . ***J. W. Groves*** **57**

Free in space at last! Miss Crane was jubilant. Miss Crane was ambitious. The stars alone knew what she planned next.

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T. T. SCOTT, *President* JACK O'SULLIVAN, *Editor* MALCOLM REISS, *Mgr. Editor*

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THE VIZIGRAPH

Our readers might get a kick out of learning that science-fiction has invaded the pages of a staid alumni publication of a large southwestern college. The far-seeing editor of the *Sooner Magazine,* published by the University of Oklahoma Association, presents Dwight V. Swain's THE SKY'S NO LIMIT, a challenging picture of the Engineering world of 1975.

Mr. Swain, who is a science-fiction author as well as an instructor in journalism at the University, sets down some intriguing ideas of this world a quarter century hence. On space ships, 1975, the author sees:

"A sphere of dully gleaming metal some fifty feet in diameter, it rests on stubby, retractable legs beside the buildings of the port center. Carriers speed to and fro from refrigerated warehouses, carrying cargo to the conveyor lift built into the ship's base.

"The load consists of 8,000-odd men and women, each frozen solid in a coffin-like block of chemical ice. Living organic matter is the one thing the duplicator units can't reproduce. This quick-freeze system cuts down space per passenger to fourteen cubic feet, slashes crew requirements, and eliminates physiological and psychological problems en route entirely.

"Now the last of the ice-blocks is aboard, the dozen-odd crewmen at their stations, the hatches sealed. The sphere floats for a moment, barely off the ground, while the stubby stabilizing legs retract. Then, slowly at first (in order to avoid the heat of atmospheric friction) it soars into the sky. No one knows for sure how fast it can go. In theory, gravity acts instantaneously, and even the electro-magnetic waves that carry the ship's power travel at speeds up to 186,000 miles per second. . . ."

MAN, 1975:

"Meet Mr. 1975. (Or maybe it's 2000, or 2050.)

"Whatever the date, he looks just about like we do.

"Inside, though, something's happened to him. Sum it up by saying that his world has, paradoxically, made him more individualistic.

"Limitless power and the transmutational duplicator give him material security—and then threw on reverse English to prove just how empty security can be. Because it also took the sparkle out of reward as an incentive. Acquisition lost its glamor. Our Hero found that interest, the intrinsic subjective lure of a given task, was the only motivation worth a hoot for the long pull.

"So he took off on a couple of new tangents.

"One was curiosity; the other craftsmanship.

"Craftsmanship gave him originality, pride of creation, in a day when push-buttons had stripped copies of everything but utility.

"Curiosity drove him into the laboratory and beneath the sea and out onto the space-ways in an eager search for new intellectual and physical experience.

"He may end up almost anywhere. . . ."

THE CITY, 1975:

"The city . . . Or is it? It looks more like a park . . . no power lines, no pavement save occasional footwalks, no neatly ordered

rows of buildings. Houses seem scattered almost at random. There's an emphasis on trees and greenery, functional designs open to the air and sun.

"Carriers ride contragravitational beams straight up from the ground to their proper level—private north, south, east or west; commercial, ditto—then follow directional power flow channels to their destinations.

"Community centers offer recreation, services, and scanners. The latter enable you to examine (in three dimensions and full color) and duplicate any object on display at the regional merchandise center, at the flick of a button and for next to nothing. Services—haircuts, hotel rooms, heloidal reducing baths—come higher.

"Not that it matters too much. Social control of power and of the duplicator units have made this a land of material plenty where finance is largely a matter of bookkeeping anyhow. . . ."

COLONY, 1975:

"Dense white carbon dioxide clouds swirl and eddy about the gigantic plastic bubble that holds Venus City's atmosphere to a point where Earth lungs can breathe it.

"Inside the bubble, noise hammers at you—the ring of steel on steel as melders join framing girders to expand the bubble; the rattle of carriers unloading; the pulse of oxygen converters; the clash of voices, the echo of laughter.

"There's a frontier air about it all. The .85 gravity gives a feeling of lightness that makes men walk with a trace more swagger. Newcomers fresh from the thawing laboratories move gingerly, wide-eyed and a trifle pale about the mouth. Research crews in space helmets crowd every airlock. One reports discovery of a silicon-chemistry life-form. Another brings in a metal whose structure can't be broken down by the duplicators. Hydroponic teams sweat over the tanks that soon will provide fresh vegetables.

"And everywhere, everywhere, there's excitement and talk of high adventure—here, or on Ganymede, or Callisto. . . ."

Well, to swing down to old Terra once again, may this stiff-backed, semi-human put in just one more appeal for double-spaced letters . . . makes it so much easier and cleaner to edit, you know. That's for you lucky fen with type machines, of course. Longhand letter penners are still as welcome as ever.

In the picture winners department how can we overlook Bryan Berry for his masterful reply in July PLANET. We award the pic on page 3 to Berry, personally autographed by the editor and all of his ubiquitous creditors. In addition, we list (1) Patrick; (2) Alfreda Runyon; (3) Robert Williams.

THE LATE ANSWER

84-16 Elmhurst Ave.
Elmhurst 73, Long Island,
New York

Dear Editor:

On this ever growing subject of: *who, wot, or even why is Bryan Berry?* Putting in my two cents' worth, I've gotten it from several sources that he is nothing more than one of the pen-names of the ubiquitous John Russell Fearn, alias Vargo Statten, alias Astron del Martia . . . and the end seems never to be in sight.

Fearn, if indeed this is he, is one of the most prolific writers in all phases of fictioneering, not limited exclusively to SF alone—probably the only writer in SF who appears so much in print. Albeit, regardless of the different styles and names he might use, I am sure he could be one of the most polished, if not the leading, writer of our time, but only if he could stick to fewer stories and cut down on the pseudonyms instead of attempting to cover the entire field all at once.

You might doubt Berry being actually Fearn. Your doubt may be a fact at the moment. However, massa' Jack, haven't you heard of writers having signed many of their past efforts and letters under their pen-names, too?

The current Anderson item adorning the cover of the May PLANET took me by surprise. Of course, there *has* to be the inevitable space gal. But on the matter of your format, et al, PS lacks distinction. I might add that this is also true of your other publication, TWO COMPLETE SCIENCE-ADVENTURE BOOKS. Instead of using the worn out technique of staff artists who seem best adapted towards the comic books, I would suggest that you put out a call for some of the more talented free-lancers, like Cartier, Bok, Paul, Finlay, to name a few. Some of them, as I recall, were responsible for some of the finest art work in the field during PS' earlier days.

Anent TCS-AB, this 'zine has consistently gone down the drain in the last year or more. You started out very nicely with the first few issues. Now you seem to cater mostly to the tastes of twelve to fourteen year olds. This is at times evident also with PS. Perhaps if such a trend brings you a larger circulation in the long run, then who am I to argue; but on the other hand, if it doesn't, then you now know the reason why.

TOPS IN SCIENCE FICTION I can do without, maybe because I have a complete file of PS anyway. Yet the big beef I've got on this matter is that I think all that effort and paper could be put to better use by issuing a decent fantasy mag. The field can stand with quite a number of 'em at the moment. Readers are still clamoring for UNKNOWN, or something on that order, just as if it were only yesterday when it expired. I am sure if science fiction can sell in almost any form published today (and most of the time it seems to be available in all sizes, formats, and dimensions), certainly fantasy should do equally as well.

Before deciding permanently on excluding club, convention, and fanmagazine notices, why don't you introduce to your readers a section entirely devoted to such subjects? If it's only a question of space, your 'zine could stand a bit of fattening up—say about four additional pages using the same size of print common to the letter column. Or if putting in a few extra pages is momentarily out of the question, you could do with one story less per issue. I believe it would be more than a welcome idea for fans and non-fans. At the present time all such forms of departments have regrettably been dropped out of all but two pro' mags.

To those who may be at the moment chortling, "It is just as well," I would like to refresh a few memories by reminding that without the support and interest of the fans, the science-fantasy field would be that much poorer today. In fact, a large number of the professionals who are in it originally came up from the ranks of fandom. Perhaps without the general goad and training they've derived from being actively engaged in fandom, we would never have known of them.

CALVIN T. BECK

Ed's note: I thought the last three or four issues had taken care of the thorny Berry question. Must have reckoned without my binocoscope. All I can say, Sir Beck, is to peruse Mr. Berry's letter in the July issue.

(*Continued on page* 108)

BUNZO FAREWELL

By CHARLES V. DE VET

"Have you ever seen a dead mahute, or even one that was ill? Or anything that looks like a graveyard?" Tang and Lutscher knew not the answer . . . but maybe Bunzo, the clober, knew.

SOMETIME during the one hundred and seventh day out of Gascol 11 the hourly signal of the tracer beam changed from a tired burp to a sharp ping. Sammy Tang knew then that Lutscher had landed and that the long chase was nearing its end. Over three years on the trail of the system's most wanted criminal, and now

Almost tonelessly Tang counted as he burned the stick-insects one by one: "One for you, Bill. Two for you, Bill...."

they would meet for the first time.

Tang had dogged his quarry's flight from the first moment his ship's beam had picked up its trace. During refueling stops on a dozen worlds he had sometimes been weeks behind, sometimes only hours, but there had been never a glimpse of Lutscher or his ship.

The chase had led, first, across, and then down the long arm of the spiral nebula known as the Milky Way, through the portion occupied by ever expanding humanity, and beyond.

Lutscher made his final stop for fuel on Gascol 11, the last occupied world at the tip of the arm. When Tang reached there Lutscher had gone—out into the blackness of deep space.

That way, Tang knew, led to suicide, for in that direction lay nothing until the next galaxy, M. 31, and Lutscher had neither the fuel nor the years of life to reach there. Tang followed. In the beginning he had expected that Lutscher's flight would turn out to be only an elusive tactic, and that he would attempt to double back in a dodging curve.

But Tang had underrated his man.

The second week out his ship entered a dust region, or dark nebula, and when it

emerged, the third week, he could see ahead a spot of brightness that marked an island star cloud. His respect for Lutscher's ingenuity and resourcefulness went up several points.

Tang spent the next several hours studying his instrument board and making calculations. At the end his forehead was sprinkled with fine drops of perspiration. He had enough fuel to reach the star cloud, but not enough to return! He kept the ship steady on its beam.

The star cloud expanded during the following days into three star systems—one with observable planets—and on one of them Lutscher had landed.

Tang timed his landing to come in during the late daylight. His landing flares would draw attention during the dark hours, and any interval earlier in the day would give the possible inhabitants of this world a better opportunity to investigate before he was ready for them.

He had only time enough to observe that the topography of the planet was mostly stone and sand, with occasional patches of vegetation—and that Lutscher's ship rested less than a hundred yards from his own—before he was enveloped in the swift fall of darkness.

He wasted no time in preparing his ship for possible contingencies.

The first button he pressed on a small wall panel activated the electric eye and automatic guns in the elevated nose of the ship. The second set in motion the instruments, in the blister at the base of the ship, that tested the planet's atmosphere, gravity, moisture content, and temperature. There was nothing more he could do until daylight.

Pulling down his sleeping board he kicked off his shoes and rested his shoulders against the wall of the compartment. He lit a cigar and seemed thoroughly preoccupied with the smoke that curled up and through the air vents.

Even being so near the completion of his task brought Tang no feeling of elation or triumph. The men of his profession came from many worlds but their calling had shaped them into a common mold. The internal discipline that best fitted them to spend long months of solitude in their lonely space ships left them without the high rises or low valleys of emotion experienced by most men. If his mission failed Tang would waste no energy in purposeless regret or worry; if it succeeded his only sensation would be satisfaction.

His cigar finished he straightened his land-muscled form on the sleeping pad and rested his head on his folded hands. When the lights went out three minutes later he was sleeping dreamlessly.

TANG prepared himself a substantial breakfast the next morning, and not until he had leisurely consumed it did he check his instruments. He was not too surprised when he found the planet's atmosphere entirely safe for human habitation.

Whatever else might be said about Lutscher he was not stupid. There had been no blind chance involved when he headed this way. The star area was uncharted but Lutscher had either been here before or had learned about it from someone who had.

The planet's temperature, Tang found, ranged from a low of 72 degrees Fahrenheit during the night to a present reading of 78. The atmosphere's only deviation from Earth-normal was a slightly higher oxygen content. Gravity tested 1.29 Gs. A human could function here quite efficiently.

Unhurriedly Tang buckled on a compact electric pistol and a stout knife. He hooked a canteen of water on his belt, and slipped a packet of concentrated food tablets into his shirt pocket. Throwing the sling of his field glasses over his shoulder, he was ready to leave.

He pulled down the port door release and it slid open a bare six inches and stopped with a dull click. It was locked and only a force powerful enough to spring the metal could open it wider until he was ready. He was certain that no moving object had approached nearer the ship than eighty-five feet during the night or the firing of the guns in the nose would have warned him, but the designers of the ship had built it for men who took chances only when necessary.

Dull daylight came in through the port opening. Outside the ship something moved.

Tang studied the moving something in-

tently, but it was too far away to be seen clearly. From where he stood it appeared to be a huge insect. He pressed the lock release all the way down and stepped into the opening left by the sliding door.

Slipping his field glasses from their case he put them to his eyes. The creature he had seen stood gazing back at him. It was definitely an insect-type, except that it had only four limbs, and stood almost as tall as a man. Its limbs and body were armored and thin, reminding him of the cartoons he had seen of stick-men. Squatting upright on two large legs it stood motionless, holding its smaller upper limbs bent clawlike at its sides. Sunlight glinted from two eye-lens clusters on each side of its thin sharp head. It resembled a giant praying-mantis.

For several long minutes Tang studied the insect but it made no further movement. He lowered his glasses and sat down in the doorway with his legs hanging outside, making himself plainly visible to his observer. He suspected that it was not a member of the planet's dominant species, but he waited to see how it would react to him. That reaction would be the best demonstration of its intelligence.

After a wait of over fifteen minutes the creature turned slowly and hopped away. It traveled in long awkward jumps much like an Earth grasshopper, its progress aided by short wings which Tang noted then for the first time. It entered a dense copse of brush that grew in large rings like the practice exercises in a schoolboy's penmanship book.

Tang rested in the doorway for a good hour after the insect had disappeared before he stepped to the ground. He looked for the planet's sun but the sky was thick with clouds that seemed not to move. He walked around the ship. There was nothing of immediate interest within sight. Locking the port door he walked toward Lutscher's ship.

His progress became slower as he neared his goal. Whether or not Lutscher was inside he would probably have his guns set for intruders. True, most watch guns when activated gave a warning shot overhead or into the ground, before concentrating on an encroacher, but with a criminal a man never knew what to expect. And Lutscher could be ruthless. However, he reached the ship without challenge.

Picking up a shiny bit of crystal at his feet he rapped on the vessel's metal skin, and waited. He knew the sound would be heard inside, while his voice probably would not. He repeated the rapping several times before he decided that Lutscher was not inside. Shrugging his shoulders he turned away. His next move would be to investigate the brushland into which the stick-insect had disappeared.

Once there he found that the openings he had noted were not ringlets, as they had appeared through his glasses. Rather they were formed by branches growing up from large flat limbs lying on the ground. The branches were bent inward like barrel staves and gave the limbs the appearance of huge skeleton torsos, with the ribs pointed upward. Small finger-like roots reached from the limbs and buried themselves in the sandy soil.

Progress through the woods, Tang soon found, was possible only by walking through the tunnels made by the branches. Traveling diagonally was slow, tortuous work, while walking alongside the limbs was impossible—they grew too close together. However, the branches of the tunnel only met well above his head, and the limbs themselves offered a hard walking surface. He made good progress.

The temperature had gone up several degrees since morning and Tang was soon perspiring freely. The planet's greater gravity pull brought a loginess to his limbs, but this was compensated for by a strange feeling of well-being. The feeling, he surmised, was caused by the high oxygen content of the air he was breathing.

He walked until he came to the branch tunnel's open end and stepped out into the planet's murky sunlight. Ahead loomed the trunk of a tree, a huge trunk probably thirty feet in diameter. He noted now that the large limbs that ran along the ground grew from this trunk. It took him only a minute to perceive that the entire plot of vegetation, which must have covered over a square mile, originated here.

WITH no warning of its approach, a creature, semi-human in form, walked into view from behind the tree trunk. Tang stiffled his instinctive urge to reach for his

pistol and stood motionless. He had learned long ago, that when playing a strange game, to let the other fellow play first.

The native possessed two limbs upon which he stood, and two others, set where its shoulders should have been, but there his human likeness ceased. Yet there was something about him that more nearly approached the human standard of a man than did the stick-insect which he had observed earlier.

The man-creature's body and limbs were well filled out, and covered with slate-gray skin. There was no neck, his head was merely an extension of his trunk. Two eye clusters, set high on his head and wide apart, and a long, slit, mouth just below were his only facial features. Two flesh-feathered apertures, situated where the breast nipples would have been on a human, and evidently respiration openings, fluttered with each breath the creature took. He was entirely unclothed and in one grubby fist he gripped a long-bladed knife.

About the native's feet frisked a small four-legged animal with the proportions of a pudgy teddybear. It too was neckless, with the same dead-white skin as the native, and reminded Tang of a bouncy little ball of bread dough.

The native stared at him until the silence grew thin and Tang decided that he would have to make the first move.

"Hello," he said. He knew there was little chance the other could understand him. In fact, there were no organs of hearing, as far as he could discern, yet he hoped to convey, by the tone of his voice that he was not a hostile intruder. He knew by experience that almost invariably an animal, or a human, feared a stranger, and reacted to that fear with either flight or a challenge. Sometimes that fear could be allayed by an early demonstration of animity.

Abruptly the native seemed to lose interest in Tang. He turned and began cutting small branch shoots from one of the surrounding limbs. These he placed on a pile which he had started on the ground.

Tang drew a deep breath of relief. Still keeping a wary eye on the native he walked over to the tree trunk and stood leaning against it. The other ignored him and went on with his work.

When the pile of shoots reached a size that satisfied him, the native picked them up and entered one of the branch tunnels leading in the opposite direction from which Tang had come. Tang followed.

They came out of the woods onto the same type of sandy plain that Tang had found when he first landed. A half mile away he could see a small river, and collected along its banks were dozens of adobe-like dwellings. They stretched away along the river banks until lost to sight among the foothills.

The small animal made a sound like the tinkling of little bells and the native walked three more steps and stopped. He bent down and the teddybear pet sprang up onto the pile of branches and rode there. Once the native turned his body to see if Tang was still following, then paid no further attention to him until they reached the village.

On the way they met several more of the man-type creatures, each with one of the doughballs tagging along, but none of them did more than glance at Tang. Most of them ignored him completely.

Once five of the stick-insects cut across their path. The native stopped to let them pass before he walked on. Ignoring each other seemed to be the custom here, Tang thought whimsically.

The same held true after they entered the village: Men, insects, and pets mingled indiscriminately, each seemingly oblivious to the presence of the others.

"Welcome to our fair city," a voice said, and Tang spun halfway around.

II

TANG pulled his sidearm part way out before he noted that the man standing in the doorway of one of the huts was unarmed. He was also shoeless and bare to the waist. Sweat ran down the blond hairs on his chest and a week's growth of blond whiskers sprouted from his face. The visible portion of his features, and his candid blue eyes, were young, but his temples were peppered with gray.

"Surely you can't be as surprised to see me as you seem," the stranger said. "Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Bill

Lutscher; and, of course, you are the famous man-hunter, Sammy Tang."

Lutscher smiled and stepped from the doorway with his hand extended. Tang gripped the hand unhesitatingly, astounded to find himself liking the man. Then he remembered ruefully that Lutscher was famous for his charm. In fact, that charm was the very quality that had indirectly made him the sought-after man he was.

"I'm certain that the pleasure is more mine than yours," Tang said, responding to the other's display of lightness.

"Won't you come in?" Lutscher asked. "Perhaps I can give you a drink? I have saved a bottle just for this momentous occasion."

Tang acknowledged the invitation with a nod of his head. They walked into the hut together. Lutscher had evidently brought most of the movable furniture from his space ship with him, Tang observed, for the room was quite well furnished.

"Be careful not to stumble over Bunzo," Lutscher said, nodding toward a side wall of the room. Tang followed his gaze and saw that Bunzo was one of the doughball pets that seemed so universal here. But Bunzo was as large as an average-sized dog.

Strangely, while the little pets had intrigued Tang, he found this one repulsive. It lay sprawled on the floor of the hut, its body gross and over-fed, looking up at Tang with little pig eyes, mean and quiet. On one side of its white skin was a dark patch shaped like a fist.

"He's a repulsive looking brute," Tang said.

"Isn't he though?" Lutscher agreed. "But he's company, and he has his uses." Lutscher laughed: He was a laughing man. "I wouldn't trade him for anything I can think of offhand," he said as he turned to a row of boxes piled against the far wall of the hut. "Now let's see. Which box is it in? Ah, here it is."

He turned and found himself staring at the pistol in Tang's hand. "I'm afraid we'll have to reverse the roles," Tang said. "I'll be the host—in my ship."

Lutscher seemed genuinely surprised. He staggered back a step and sank heavily into a chair next to his pet. He held the bottle of whiskey in his lap with one hand, while the other idly stroked the blubbery head of the drowsing Bunzo. "For a minute I'd forgotten," he said, recovering his composure. "You still think that you can take me away from here, don't you? But of course you can't understand yet that the cards are stacked against you."

"Is there anything you'd like to take with you when we leave?" Tang asked.

"It won't work, Sammy," Lutscher warned.

"On your feet," Tang said.

Lutscher rose without hesitation and walked to the door ahead of Tang. Outside they found a dozen of the natives waiting. Others were coming up fast. They blocked the way with their bodies.

"You might kill a few of them," Lutscher said, "but you'll never get away."

It took Tang only a second to weigh the odds and make his decision. "It looks like the first round is yours," he said, putting up his gun.

They walked back into the hut and sat down. "Tell me," Tang said. "Am I a prisoner?"

"Not at all," Lutscher answered. "You may leave anytime you like. But you can't take me with you."

Tang eased himself down on the cot Lutscher offered and sat in deep introspection. But not for long. He decided quickly that he must learn more about the present set-up before he made his next move. Perhaps he could get the information he needed from Lutscher. "What's the deal here, Bill?" he asked. "Have they set you up as some sort of demi-god?"

Lutscher seemed eager to talk. "Part of the deal, as you call it, will have to remain my secret," he said. "I'd be a fool to show you all my cards. But ask any questions you care to. I'll answer some of them at least."

"All right. How did you get word to your friends to stop me when I started out with you? Or did you station them outside your door when I first came?"

Lutscher shook his head. "I didn't, and, as you can see, they aren't there now. But just try to take me out of here and they'll be back before you can walk two steps. Incidentally, they call themselves mahutes. The stick-insects are ankites, and the pets, like Bunzo here, are clobers. Now you know

the names of the only denizens of this world I've seen so far."

"How did you know about this place?"

"In my business you either have something like this in reserve up your sleeve, or the long arm of the law, represented by yourself, my friend, will soon pull you in. Enough to say that I learned about it from someone who had been here. I'll confess, though, that I had my anxious moments coming in. I was afraid that the information I had about the place might have been, ah . . . colored, by the imagination of my informer. But, as you can see, it turned out to be a very delightful place."

"You know I'll never leave without you, don't you?" Tang asked abruptly. "Why haven't you had me killed?"

"AT FIRST I planned that," Lutscher answered with friendly frankness. "But after I investigated the situation, and understood it, I saw no reason to do so. In fact, I have strong hopes of convincing you to stay here of your own free will."

"You must have picked up a touch of madness somewhere along the line if you think that."

"No, I don't think so," Lutscher said, growing very earnest. "Look at me. What kind of a man do you see?"

"I see nothing except the man I'm going to bring in for trial."

"You must have my record," Lutscher said, disregarding the reply. "And you've probably studied it and my characteristics until you know me better than I know myself. Remember them? I'm the highstrung, hypertension, ulcer type of guy. A doctor told me once that my metabolism burns too fast.

"I've gotten into most of my trouble because of an inner drive too great for my own good. I always had to try to change the status quo, to incite unrest and rebellion among the natives of the occupied worlds, to steal the unstealable, to pit one world against another. Is that the kind of man you're seeing now?"

"No, it isn't," Tang said thoughtfully. I'd best describe you now as a contented man. If I didn't know better, I'd say you hadn't a care in the world."

"And you'd be right," Lutscher said, leaning forward in his desire to emphasize his sincerity. "You haven't been here long enough to feel it, but this planet does something to you. I don't know what it is. I've gained twenty pounds in the two months I've been here. I've lost my unrest, my drive to change things. I'm happy now. Why should I want to return to the outside where life is like a thin crust that you walk on carefully, always afraid of breaking through? And some morning you'll wake up and you'll have the key, the answer to the universe, and you won't want to leave either."

"I've wondered briefly about you, myself," Tang said. "And I'll admit you're not the type of man I expected to find. But I've formed conclusions different than yours. And I don't envy you. A dope addict has the same feeling you have when he's under the influence of the drug. But I don't envy him. What have you been eating since you've been here? Anything at all native to this planet?"

Lutscher nodded. "You may be right about that," he said. "I'm not so stupid that I've missed thinking of it myself. At first I thought the good feeling might be just the lethargy induced by the atmosphere's high oxygen content and the greater gravity.

"But my final conclusion was pretty much the same as yours. During the past month and a half I've lived exclusively on the diet of the mahutes— that's the shoots you saw one of them gathering. But what do I care about the source of my well-being? The only thing that concerns me is that it's there."

"I'm afraid that to me the source would be more important," Tang said, "and I'll stick to my own food. Right now everything looks very rosy to you. But if it turns out that you've been eating a dangerous drug and it begins to wreck your system, how will it look then? Especially if you find that you can't break the habit?"

"But it's not dangerous," Lutscher insisted, "and I'll prove it to you. Tomorrow we'll take a stroll through the village. I'll point out a few things that will surprise you. I presume you'll be spending the night with me?"

Tang nodded.

III

THAT night Tang slept with a guarded alertness. It was a part of him, which he could turn on and off, as the occasion demanded. Six hours after he dropped off to sleep he awoke, with all his senses alive and ready for action. Without moving he listened. Inside and outside the hut all was silent.

Rising quietly he drew his gun and walked over to Lutscher's cot. He shook the sleeping figure.

"What . . .?" Lutscher asked sleepily, sitting up.

"We're going to try it again," Tang said. "Get dressed. Quietly."

"Get dressed?" Lutscher's brain was still sleep-clogged. "Why? Oh, I get it" he answered himself. "You think you can take me away while the mahutes are sleeping. Well, I suppose the only way you can find out is by trying."

"Don't waste time," Tang snapped.

Lutscher rolled out of bed and began pulling on his trousers. Over in the corner Bunzo grunted, and stirred uneasily.

"I'm ready," Lutscher said a minute later.

"You'd better put on your shoes," Tang said.

"I assure you I won't need them," Lutscher answered. Behind the words Tang could sense his silent laughter.

Outside they found that the first streaks of dawn were breaking over the river. They walked fifty feet before one of the mahutes shuffled out of a hut ahead of them. Another came from their right, and behind them they heard two more running toward them.

"There'll be more waiting for us up ahead," Lutscher said. "Are you going to try to shoot your way through them?"

Tang let his shoulders droop. "We'll go back to the hut," he said.

"You think you've won again," he told Lutscher, once they were there. "But I had a double purpose in taking our little trip. I think I know now how you communicate with your friends."

Lutscher glanced up. "You do?"

"Yes. Of the three species here only the clobers have vocal chords. I suspect the others are deaf as well as mute. Therefore, they either have a symbiosis among themselves, which you've somehow learned to penetrate, or their communication is telepathic."

"Good boy," Lutscher said enthusiastically. He seemed to harbor no resentment. "I'll admit you figured it out faster than I did," he said. "But I knew you would in time. And I allowed for that. You're right. All life on the planet, as far as I have been able to learn, is telepathic. But I still have the advantage. You don't know how to contact them. And I don't think you ever will find out."

"You're stupid if you think that." Despite himself Tang found that he was losing his temper. The man was so cocksure, and so far so untouchable. "It may take me time but I'll find it. I'll lay you odds on that."

"Yes, I guess you will," Lutscher said thoughtfully. "Sammy, you're like a bulldog with a bone. You never let go, do you? I suppose I should admire that quality in you, but I find myself wondering if I shouldn't have killed you when I first saw you."

"You probably should have," Tang said. "Because from here in I'm going to make certain that you never get the chance. Right now we're going to go through your things."

A motion of anger went over Lutscher's face as he caught the implication of Tang's words. "Damn you," he said.

"Get your boxes and dump them on your cot one at a time," Tang said. "I'll pick out what I want."

For a moment it seemed that Lutscher was going to be stubborn. But then, with a trait he had of moving his eyes and not turning his head, he glanced at the gun on Tang's hip and shrugged. He rose to his feet and walked over to his pile of boxes.

As Lutscher dumped the contents of each one on the cot Tang went through them and picked out what he wanted. At the end he had two pistols, a rifle, and several knives. "Now I'll take the key to your ship," he said.

Wordlessly Lutscher reached into his pocket and pulled out a chain with a small key on the end. He tossed it on the cot.

"I'll leave you for awhile," Tang said. "But I'll be back. And if I get any interference from your friends I'll kill them and

you too. I don't *have* to bring you back alive, you know."

BACK at Lutscher's space ship Tang spent an hour transferring the fuel remaining in Lutscher's tanks to his own ship. When he finished his tanks were well over three-quarters full, more than enough to get him back to Gascol 11. He made no attempt to remove the weapons from Lutscher's vessel. He had the key, and if Lutscher were able to get that away from him there would be no stopping him anyway.

As he walked leisurely back to the village he wondered how Lutscher would receive him.

Unexpectedly Lutscher appeared to bear no grudge. "I'll admit I was a bit riled when you took my guns," he said. "But I suppose it's just the cop in you. And there's no point in our carrying a grudge. After all, we're the only humans on the planet and we're going to be here a long time, so we might as well stay friends."

Tang nodded but made no reply.

"Another thing," Lutscher said. "You've missed an angle in your calculations. You think that if you can discover how I communicate with the mahutes you'll be able to get your way. But once again you've underestimated me, my friend. The impression I've emphasized on them is that you're a bit demented. You act illogically. You're driven by compulsions that have to be restrained. And the mahutes are very susceptible."

Tang smiled. "You're clever," he said. "I'll admit it. But some day not too long from now you and I will be heading back to civilization. I promise you that."

"That remains to be seen," Lutscher answered. "Do you still want to take that trip through the village we were talking about last night?"

"Why not?"

They walked out of the hut and into the clouded sunlight of the outdoors. "Have you any idea just how intelligent the mahutes are?" Tang asked.

"Very low quotient," Lutscher answered. "In fact I'd say that most of their reactions were prompted by instinct rather than intelligence. They have approximately the same reasoning power as smart dogs."

"What else have you learned about them?"

"Not too much," Lutscher said. "But I've made a few surmises." He seemed to have entirely dismissed from his mind the unpleasant morning occurence. "Have you ever heard the word, androgynous?"

"It refers to flowers, doesn't it? Something about their being able to seed themselves without stamin from other flowers?"

"That's pretty much it," Lutscher agreed. "I think that biologically the mahutes are the same as those flowers. Each possesses within himself the complete mechanism for self- fertilization. At least to me there's no apparent sexual differences in any I've seen, or even evidence of reproductive organs."

"That's interesting," Tang said. "How about the clobers? Could there possibly be any biological connection between them and the mahutes? Without exception each mahute has one with him wherever he goes."

"That's true," Lutscher replied. "But I suppose they just like pets. By the way, we'll have to stop here. We're at the edge of the section where the ankites—the stick insects—live. It's taboo territory."

FOR some reason Tang received the distinct impression that Lutscher had changed the subject to avoid speaking further of the clobers. In the back of his mind he filed that away for future reference. "Why should this area be taboo?" he asked. "The ankites seem to come and go among the mahutes without hindrance. Or is it taboo just to you and me?"

"No. A mahute wouldn't think of entering here. They have some deep fear of the place. What it is I don't know. They don't seem to fear the ankites themselves."

They turned and started back for their own section of the village. "There's another thing that puzzles me," Tang said. "That's the sealed huts. What do you know about them?"

"Nothing, except that about one in every three is sealed. I don't know why. The strange part is that I've seen the mahutes sealing them with mud and sand from the river—that's what the huts are made of originally—and I've tried to investigate but they won't let me near them then. I suppose it'll be quite awhile before we fully

understand the organization here."

"What do the ankites and the clobers eat?" Tang asked.

"The same tree shoots that the mahutes eat," Lutscher answered. "The mahutes gather it for them."

"Doesn't that seem strange?" Tang asked. "Do you think there's any possibility that the ankites are in control here? You said the mahutes weren't very intelligent."

"I hadn't thought of that before," Lutscher answered. "But I don't think so. I believe they're simply two primitive species that have found the means of living together in mutual cooperation."

"Just what do the ankites contribute to that cooperation?"

Lutscher shook his head. "You've got me."

"By the way, you were going to show me something that would explain your theory of well being."

"That's right," Lutscher said, "I was, wasn't I? Well, this is it. Have you noticed that there are young mahutes, and middle aged ones, but none that are old? I'm convinced that the food here is the source of immortality!"

"That's absurd," Tang said, startled at the other's suggestion. "In the first place, how could you tell how old they are? Perhaps some of those you think are middled-aged are really old, or even ready to die."

"You know better than that," Lutscher answered. "There are always signs of advanced age, such as slow movements, wrinkled skin, or bent figures, that can be read by anyone looking for them. Those signs are not present here. Furthermore, have you seen a dead mahute, or even one that was ill? Or anything that looks like a graveyard?"

"I haven't," Tang answered. "But that would prove nothing. I haven't been here long enough to say that there aren't any because I haven't seen them. Neither have you. And naturally these people would have their own rituals for disposing of their dead. Perhaps the burying is done in secret." Suddenly he stopped walking. "I have it," he said. "The sealed huts! I'll wager that's their burial custom. When one of them dies the others seal his body in his hut."

For the time it took him to draw two deep breaths Lutscher seemed half convinced. Then, "I'm sure you're wrong," he said, but there was an excitement in his voice: The kind of excitement that pleased him. "If you're game let's find out," he urged. "As soon as we get the chance we'll break into one of the sealed huts and see what's there."

IV

THE next day Lutscher was missing.

Tang had gone to the space ship for a box of cigars and when he returned he found that Lutscher's hut had been freshly sealed. As he stood, uncertain what his next move should be, one of the mahutes came up and took him by the arm.

He allowed the mahute to lead him to another hut nearby. Inside he found all of Lutscher's possessions and his own. The furniture had been carefully placed in the same positions it had occupied in the original hut. But Lutscher was nowhere in sight.

During the time it took Tang to smoke one cigar he debated with himself. If they were holding Lutscher prisoner he should be in no immediate danger. Each sealed hut had air vents in the top that were never closed. If they had killed him then no amount of haste could help him. On the other hand, he decided, perhaps they were subjecting him to some ritualistic torture. He rose to his feet and buckled on his gun. He'd have to try to get into the sealed hut. If the mahutes hadn't killed Lutscher he might still be able to save him.

Once outside Tang found the mahutes maintaining their guard. He walked toward them and they bunched themselves ahead of him. He drove his shoulder against the nearest one. The native reeled aside but made no effort to strike back. The other mahutes pressed forward, bearing Tang back by the very weight of their numbers. He'd have to use more drastic measures.

He drew his gun but he doubted that they were intelligent enough to recognize it as a weapon. Pointing the gun at the feet of the nearest mahutes he squeezed the grip and held it tight while the lethal ray burned the sand to a bubbling, smoking caldron. The mahutes stared stupidly at the molten spot, moving back only when

the heat scorched their legs.

Tang forced them to either side until he had cleared a path to Lutscher's hut. Taking advantage of their distraction he dashed forward and turned with his back to the hut.

The mahutes did not hesitate. They rushed him in a body.

That left him no choice, Tang realized. He shot the first to reach him in the leg. As the native stumbled and fell, others climbed over his body to get at Tang. He shot a second and a third and still the mahutes came on. He tried to hold them back by playing the gun's beam at their feet but they walked into the beam and fell dead or mutilated. Several of the inevitable accompanying clobers died with them.

Soon the blood and the slaughter of the single-minded natives sickened Tang and he loosened his grip on his weapon. The mahutes grabbed him by the arms and legs and carried him away from the hut, making no attempt to disarm him. They deposited him some yards away and went back to their posts. Other mahutes came up and carried off the dead and wounded. Tang cursed and staggered into his own hut.

For a long while he sat with his head in his hands, lost in a gray obsession. Lutscher had undoubtedly caused the interference of the mahutes by the picture he had given them of Tang being insane. But whatever the reason, as a fellow human, it was his duty to rescue Lutscher, if at all possible. But there was a limit to what lengths he would go to do it. After all, was the life of one criminal worth that of all the mahutes he would have to slaughter, or even of the ones he had already killed? The decision was a hard one.

He heard a noise and looked up. A mahute was standing in the doorway. In his arms the native held one of the little doughball pets. He set the clober on the floor and withdrew.

A peace offering? Tang didn't know, but he decided to wait. Perhaps he would have a better chance to rescue Lutscher later.

What he needed now was some way to communicate with the mahutes. If he only knew Lutscher's secret. For a moment he debated eating the native food. Perhaps that was the necessary first step. But his whole nature shrank from the thought. The risk of making himself an addict was too much to ask—at least until all else failed.

THE clober *was* company. And it seemed to crave affection. It frisked about Tang's feet until he picked it up and held it in his his lap. As he went through his troubled thoughts he idly stroked and fondled the little pet.

Tang set himself on a schedule. Once every hour he walked to the door and looked across to Lutscher's hut. Always the situation remained the same.

Late that night he finally fell asleep. The little clober crawled up on the bed and curled into the crook of his arm.

He awoke twice during the night. Each time, by the light of his flash, he could see the patient mahutes keeping their vigil. And each time he returned to his bed the clober crawled back into its sleeping place in the crook of his elbow. He found himself growing quite fond of the little beast.

The third time Tang awoke he saw, through the slit in the eye he opened, that it was daylight.

Father? For a moment Tang thought he was still dreaming. Had he heard a voice? He lay quietly, his mind still not functioning too clearly.

Father? the voice came again. But was it a voice? Now that he thought of it he was certain that there had been no actual sound. It was more like an audible thought.

A faint inkling of what was happening penetrated his consciousness. He remained quiet, deliberately keeping his mind in its drowsy, slow-functioning sleep fog. And then he caught the call in all its inflections. The sense-impression he caught was not father, exactly; rather it was a compound picture of benefactor, loved one, guardian.

And Tang was certain the mind picture had been communicated to him by the clober at his side. He had made his first telepathic contact with the planet's denizens!

For a half-hour after he arose Tang was unable to reestablish contact with the little doughball. Then he realized that he was trying too hard.

He sat down and forced himself to relax. His mind gradually calmed and made itself receptive. *Food? Hungry?* the clober's

thoughts reached him.

Tang rose and walked to the door. The mahutes had left a small bundle of shoots at the side of the hut, as they had done every morning for Lutscher. He brought several of them in with him.

All during the morning he spent his time perfecting his ability to catch the clober's thoughts. By noon he had it mastered. The little beast's intellect was quite rudimentary, registering its need for food, desire to sleep, for affection, and love for its benefactor, himself.

When it became hungry again at noon Tang tried his next experiment. Lutscher had been able to communicate with the mahutes, and quite probably with Bunzo. He should be able to do the same.

Food . . . hungry, the clober broadcast. Tang looked at it, and in his mind commanded it to go out the door and get a tree shoot. At the second attempt the little pet turned and obeyed!

So far so good. Now to try his luck with the mahutes.

He went to the door and tried to project his thoughts to the passing natives. He failed. An hour later he came back in, tired and discouraged. His head ached with a dull pain that seemed to be trying to force its way through his skull. He let his body sag across the bed. The clober climbed up and joined him.

Suddenly he had the answer. The natives were never seen without an accompanying clober. And Lutscher had had his Bunzo. They were unable to make direct telepathic contact: It had to be done through the clobers!

He sprang to his feet and went outside, with the clober clutched in his arms. A mahute was passing in the packed-sand street. Directing his thought to the mahute, but through the clober, Tang thought, *Stop.* The mahute stopped!

Go, Tang commanded, and the mahute went on. Success.

He made one more test. The next mahute to pass was carrying a load of shoots. *Leave them by my door,* Tang directed. Without hesitation the mahute turned and deposited the shoots.

Next Tang felt for the mahute's thoughts and caught them readily, but they were almost purely functional, bearing little resemblance to the activity of a reasoning intellect. There was no chance of his learning anything of Lutscher's whereabouts there. However he had succeeded in what he set out to do.

Now for the final step. He went inside and buckled on his sidearm.

V

SUDDENLY the clober squirmed in his arms and a chaos of mad, slobbering, disconnected thoughts washed against Tang's mind and staggered it with their very morbidity and black, hopeless fear.

For a moment he stood mentally numbed, desperately striving to sort the hodgepodge of impressions into a semblance of lucidity.

But they hit him, wave upon wave, as tangible as physical blows, and he fought the nausea they brought as he read them. *I'm dead . . . like a spider . . . wasps! My God, this can't be happening! The bastards, bastards, bastards. Move. I've got to move! I can't!* The thoughts ran together like the incoherent mass of a madman's ravings.

Then the mind Tang was hearing seemed to halt, as though it felt a new thing. *Sammy? Sammy? Can you hear me?*

"I hear you!" Tang burst out, speaking aloud, but remembering, distractedly, to keep the clober in the forefront of his mind.

Then come and kill me. For God's sake, come and kill me!

Fighting down the shock that threatened to overwhelm him Tang dashed from the hut, still clutching the little clober. They wouldn't stop him this time, he vowed.

A semblance of reason came to him before he reached Lutscher's hut and he halted. There was something he should try, he realized, before he began killing. He looked down at the clober and then sent his message at the mahutes. *Go back to your huts!* he commanded. They made no move to leave.

Then he understood that he was unable to contact the whole group at one time. It had to be done individually.

Return to your home, he directed, concentrating on the nearest mahute. Silently it turned and left. Tang repeated the order

to another. Again and again until he was alone.

There was no time to waste. He aimed his pistol to fire at a tangent and blasted a hole through the wall of Lutscher's sealed hut. He crawled in.

The sight that met his eyes was one that Tang knew he would see in his nightmares the rest of his life.

On the ground against the far wall lay the hide of one of the large clobers. He recognized the dark fist-shaped mark on the hide's side as having belonged to Bunzo. Standing on the hide was one of the young stick-insects, its sharp little face ugly with some emotion and its mouth casing drawn back from its pointed teeth.

At Tang's feet lay Lutscher. He was muttering hoarsely to himself, and in his eyes that glared at the ceiling was madness —stark, terrible madness!

The flesh had been torn from Lutscher's left arm, stripping it to the bone. A shiny, gelatinous coating, covering the raw meat of the shoulder, seemed to have stopped the blood flow. Great chunks of flesh had been torn from one hip, and his teeth showed through where Lutscher's cheeks had been.

The ankite insect moved toward them and Tang beamed the ugly little head from its body.

Lutscher muttered something and Tang knelt at his side. God help you, he thought. "Is there anything I can do, Bill?" he asked softly.

"It's too late to help me now," Lutscher rasped feebly. "But there's no pain, Sammy." He seemed rational now, but Tang knew it would not last for long. "Just kill me, Sammy. And get out while you still can."

"What happened?"

"One of the ankites came . . . when was it? Yester—yesterday?" Lutscher's whispering voice broke on the last word and he seemed about to slip back into his madness, but he drew a deep breath and went on talking.

"The ankite bit me. It must have injected a poison. I couldn't move. They sealed me in with Bunzo. Soon after Bunzo screamed and burst. You see the set-up now, don't you Sammy? The clobers are like cocoons on Earth. I think metamorphosis is the word. The ankites emerge from the clobers, like butterflies come from cocoons. And the poor, stupid mahutes feed them, care for their clobers, and then furnish the *piece d'occasion* for the transformation feast." He laughed, and the utter lack of mirth caused a spasm of sickness in Tang's stomach.

"And you . . ." Tang started to say.

"And I. . . . To the ankites I'm just another mahute. I'm like the spider that the wasp paralyzes and brings to its nest to be consumed by the young while it's still alive. Lutscher's voice rose to a shrill whisper. "Sammy! Kill me. Please! I can't take anymore!"

"I'll get you back to the ship," Tang said.

"I'm too far gone for . . ." Lutscher stopped. His eyes seemed to try to smile. "Go ahead, Sammy," he said. "Try."

Tang put one arm under Lutscher's shoulders and the other under his knees and lifted him off the ground.

Lutscher's body came unhinged in the middle. A groan started in his throat and blood gushed from the raw places on his body. Tang put him down and Lutscher's mouth opened and a long sigh came out. He knew they would never be able to hurt Lutscher again.

Tang's mind had gone cold now. There was little he could do for Lutscher, but what little he could do, he would. He drew his gun and sprayed its beam up and down the length of Lutscher's body until nothing remained except a charred lump. At least he'd furnish no more meals for the ankites.

On the way back to the space ship Tang met exactly eight of the stick-insects. He counted them.

"One for you, Bill. Two for you, Bill," he counted as he burned each one down. Nothing he had ever done gave him as great a sense of fierce satisfaction.

Less than an hour after he left Lutscher's remains he blasted off the planet. He hated to think of the three months he would have to spend alone before he reached Gascol 11.

The Flight of the Eagle

By SOL GALAXAN

It was a new and mysterious plant. It could make its own weather; it was sentient, and it prospered on Venus. But Earth needed it desperately. And Bat Kendo, the radar-mutant, was told to bring it in.

HUMANS are a strange breed. Forgetful. They grow accustomed to the wonders they live among so easily that they never really figure up the cost. A little time passes and the bright memories tarnish and are covered over with newer ones. And the men who picked up the check and maybe paid with their lives? Forgotten.

For example, when you're sitting comfortably in the New York to San Francisco stratojet, and you take the trouble to look down at the lush verdure of the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada, do you ever remember that a few short years back that lovely fertile parkland was a rocky, barren waste? Or when you taste the delicious tropical fruits that are brought to your table from the Mojave Basin, do you think of Bat Kendo, the man who made all that possible? Like fun you do! I'll give you ten to one you never heard of Bat Kendo. Maybe you don't even know that the reason those once sterile wastelands are now the larders of the North American continent is . . . weather-plant. And I'll give eight to five you don't even know where that weath-

er-plant came from, or how it got here, or what it cost. Not in money . . . in lives.

Well, I know, and for once I'd like to have someone stand still long enough so I could tell the story. The minute anyone sees an old spaceman like me coming, they jet the hell out of there fast. "Old Captain Morley's got another shaggy dog to comb out!" they say, and beat it. My stories, it seems, are too old fashioned for this modern age. Just because I, and a lot of others like me—only maybe not so lucky—spent our lives opening up the spaceways instead of sitting home on our venturiis, we're "odd characters" and "old space-hacks," and our stories are tall tales—yarns to be avoided, or laughed at if it's not possible to avoid them.

Okay, I expect that. But I still want to tell how that weather-plant came to be where it is now, and what Bat Kendo had to do with it. He was my shipmate on the R. S. *Eagle,* and I think he's got a little credit coming to him.

The history books will tell you that during the last few years of the 20th Century the population of North America increased by something like 600 per cent. They might even tell you that this put such a load on the continental resources—food, mainly—that famine became a possibility for the first time in the history of the continent. Things were pretty tight. People were actually starving amid the technological wonders of the time. Hydroponics were tried, but they fizzled badly.

The only answer seemed to be complete utilization of all available land area for food production. And that meant that a lot of land that couldn't grow weeds had to produce edible crops. That's the way things stood back in '02, just after the William Robert Holcomb Foundation's R. S. *Explorer* returned from Venus with what the botanists thought might be an answer.

Of course, the Earth-Luna System was well traveled even then, but it took the big money of the Holcomb Foundation plus a whopping World Federal Government grant to make a deep space mission feasible.

It was a Holcomb Foundation metallurgist's synthesis of impervium that made deep space navigable. Before this time all ships were chemical-fuelled because the weight of lead needed to shield atomics would nail any spacer built to terra firma . . . but good. Chemical ships could make Luna, but no farther. Lucky to get that far with the pumps feeding the jets a stream of monoatomic hydrogen as thick as your arm. A ship could carry about enough juice to get up the necessary seven-a-second with maybe enough for landing . . . maybe. Even then plenty of ships that carried a pound or two of mass too much arced back to Earth and splashed themselves all over the ground. Others got up escape-velocity only to run dry trying to land on Luna. Their metal bones are still up there; if you care to look for them.

Impervium changed all that. Here was a metal that was easily worked, as light as a good quality aluminum-magnesium alloy, and strong as steel. And it was impervious to everything except neutrino bombardment. That was the ticket to deep space. Atomics were in and chemicals out. I might add that none of us were sorry to see them go, either.

Luna remained the jumping-off place. And Foy City was the staging area for trips to . . . UP. Before the successful flight of the *Explorer,* Foy had been just a combination mining and scientific camp. After the *Explorer* returned from Venus, spacemen began to pour up from Earth, and Foy City became one of the rowdiest places under Sol. Jetmen and pilots, tubemen and ABs, all the restless flotsam of humanity flowed up to Luna in a steady stream to mingle with the miners from the Diggings and the longhairs from the Cosmiray Labs and the big dome of Starview.

Mars was reached and colonization began. And men set up a settlement on Venus. The Holcomb Foundation was convinced that they had the answer to the critical food shortage on Earth. Weather-plant. The one useful thing that stinking Venus produces.

Weather-plant is a moss-like plant that will grow almost anywhere. The Foundation botanists found that it gathered nitrogen and water in some inexplicable way, and they became interested in its possibilities. Something had to be done about soil reclamation back on Earth, or starvation would strangle the race. Weather-plant looked like the answer. What the smart boys couldn't have guessed was that in addition

to its other strange properties, weather-plant was intelligent—sentient, at least. And they didn't know that it liked its wet, foggy environment very, very much.

I HIT Foy City with a mammoth thirst and very little spending money. A bad combination. I had a Pilot's rating and a brand-new Second Officer's ticket, and I needed a job.

I'd been handling a regular chemical flight out of Foy to Montevideo for a one horse concern that was still trying to make the low grade uranium ore found on the Moon pay off. When I came down onto the great pumice plain of Mare Imbrium that served Foy as a spaceport, the patched-up blow-torch I was jockeying blew a venturi and buried herself under twenty feet of pumice. If it had happened on Earth, we'd have been cooked, but Luna's one sixth gravity saved our hides. Those were the days before tractor-pressor beam landings, you see. Back then you landed a can by balancing her on her tail flare like a ball on a water spout. And that was a rough go anyway you want to look at it.

Anyway, after the pileup I quit. There was some difference of opinion on that particular point between the company and me. They claimed I was fired.

Quit or fired, however, I didn't get paid, and that led me to seek solace in the local pubs. That, in turn, led me to the city drunk-tank for the night, and that's where I ran into Bat Kendo. . . .

Bat was Chief Tubeman on the R. S. *Eagle*. He was also a mutation. Not that he wasn't human or anything like that. And he certainly wasn't the much kicked around "homo superior." He merely had an extra sense. We all have it dormant. Bat had it well developed. That's why he was called Bat. People thought he could see in the dark. It wasn't that. Try closing your eyes and moving your head slowly toward an obstruction. If you are very careful and very alert, you'll be able to sense the obstruction before you touch it. Well, Bat could "see" things that way . . . perfectly. He even used to pick up beer money by getting into the ring blindfolded and letting pugs throw punches at him. They hit him, but not often. And when they did connect it wasn't because he didn't sense the blows coming; it was because he was slow on his feet and generally three quarters drunk.

Bat's father, Nakano Kendo, had grown up in Nagasaki. He'd been exposed to radiation by the second atom blast there. Bat had befuddled the geneticists by showing up a mutation one generation before he was supposed to. He used to laugh about that.

His mother had been Russian. Certainly you couldn't tell his nationality by looking at him. His face held a suggestion of the Asiatic, but trying to place him anthropologically would have been as difficult as finding a pure Anglo-Saxon, whatever that is.

Bat was just the product of an insane age. A child of a man whose germ plasm had been dosed with radiation. But for all of that Bat Kendo was normal. Two arms, two legs, two eyes. Only his built-in radar marked him as different. That, and his terrific taste for booze. I never saw him sober. Yet to see him, you'd never guess he was perpetually saturated. There may have been bigger drunks in space, but I never knew one.

As a tubeman, he never had an equal. As an all around right guy, he never will have.

It was Bat that talked me into signing on the Eagle. They needed a Pilot, and where a better place to find one than in the Foy City drunk tank? I knew the *Eagle*, of course. Everyone in the Luna-Earth System did. She was a five hundred tonner, newly converted to atomics and fitting in the Foundation yards for a flight to Venusberg.

She was going to pick up a full cargo of weather-plant from the settlement. A hundred tons of it. And brother, that's a lot of weather-plant.

This was to be the first quantity shipment of the stuff. The "pilot-shipment." The botanists suspected a lot and had great hopes. But it was up to the *Eagle* to get the stuff to Earth. She was the only ship available for the trip with enough storage space for the plant, and when I listened to Bat talk about it, the flight began to take on the aspect of a mercy mission.

I knew people were going hungry back Earthside, and old Bat was really steamed up about it. I dare say if it hadn't been for his pep talk I'd never have signed on. Deep space was still new, and I liked living. But

Bat talked me into it, and as soon as the turnkey shook us out of the sack and shooed us out Bat and I headed for the Foundation yards and the *Eagle*.

My first view of the ship didn't do much to make me happy about the trip. She looked old and scabrous standing tall on her tail fins out on the flat, glaring plain of Mare Imbrium. Her hull was meteor-scarred and eroded by atmospheric friction, and there seemed to be an abundance of patch-welds on her.

Her tubes, however, were spanking brand new, and after I had inspected her control-tube-pile system—as all prospective pilots have a right to do—in company with Bat and Captain Reynard, I signed.

Reynard was a decent enough skipper. He wasn't much of a disciplinarian, but the boat only carried a crew of twenty, so that was no problem. As an astrogator, he had quite a reputation, and he'd been out to Venus before on one of the ships that lugged the settlers and scientific personnel out there.

There wasn't much fanfare when the time came for our departure. Ships were lifting every day for Mars just then, and the departure of one for Venus didn't seem important. Before we left though, a Holcomb Foundation man came aboard and spoke to us about the importance of our trip. He said that if we didn't bring back the weather-plant in good shape, things might turn nasty on Earth. It would be another year and a half before Venus and Earth came into conjunction again, and by that time it might be too late for the thousands who were going hungry back home. It gave us a sense of responsibility, all right. And it particularly had an effect on Bat.

WE LIFTED from Mare Imbrium on 11/9/02 Earth Date. I recall that I gave her 2G, easing her up to 6G and holding that acceleration for sixty hours. By that time our speed in MPH wouldn't have made sense. I revelled in the power under my hands, and the feeling that I could actually waste an erg or two without having to worry myself bald about landing. The *Eagle* carried fifty pounds of ingot thorium as fuel, and with our new atomics, that would have taken us to Centaurus, if we'd had the time. It was wonderful to be able to keep the boat under a steady 1G all the way to turnover instead of having to endure the endless nausea of free-fall. Even seasoned spacemen never got used to free-fall, and atomics eliminated it, thank God!

The sunward flight was something to remember for sheer beauty. Earth and Luna faded astern until they were just a bright point of light. The sun blazed like a ball of white fire ahead of us, and Venus grew brighter and brighter against the breath-taking backdrop of the Milky Way. It was a gorgeous sight—but frightening, too. I had the feeling that I was terribly exposed, as though I were standing balanced atop the spire of the Holcomb Tower, five hundred stories above the teeming streets of New York. Agoraphobia, I think the psychs call it. The others felt it too. In fact one of the jetmen went slightly off his rocker and had to be jugged. But most of the men came through the first fear of deep space well enough, and as an astrogator Captain Reynard was strictly one hundred per cent.

I didn't see much of Bat on the trip, since he was down in the heavily sheathed tube-room with his "black-gang." But I could tell whenever he was on watch, because if I turned the interphone on without warning, I could almost invariably hear his beery baritone singing the praises of:

"That Lulu! Belle of ol' Foy City
Who wears two hammocks . . ."

Bat was something of a poet, in his lighter moments—though most of his stuff was lamentably unprintable.

I did get in on one little session with him and about a dozen of the crew. That was down in the forecastle where he was entertaining the off-watches by letting them blindfold him and then try to hide a bottle of the tetrant alky we called our "rations." Naturally, he always found it, and naturally he always drank it. It took them most of the sunward trip to wise up to the fact that he was a mutation with his own detecting system already built-in—courtesy of the Manhattan Project and Nakaro Kendo's irradiated gametes. The crew lost most of its alky rations that way, and old Bat soaked the stuff up like a sponge.

We passed turn-over point and then the long fall down to Venus began—three weeks of it.

Contact was established with the settlement while we were still above the stratosphere, and our Ultra-wave-radar went into action, the endless scanning that is absolutely essential to the landing of spacecraft through cloud layers.

I don't mind admitting that there was a cold sweat on my brow when I started down through the soup. The reports from UVR indicated plenty of clearance from the mountains, but I was still leery. Some of those peaks are reported to be as high as 200,000 feet. The *Eagle's* gyros were screaming and the muffled thunder of the jets filtered through every plate of her. I'd let her slide a bit and then snatch her up with a blast of the jets. Each time I touched the firing consoles, I could hear the moan of the blasted atomic particles rushing through the venturiis, and I could see the glitter of the cloud moisture that hugged the ports as it absorbed lethal radiations from the tail-flare.

Then the clouds began to thin and I could make out the pattern of the spaceport beneath us through the billowing formaldehyde mists that serve Venus for an atmosphere.

I was a wreck by the time the *Eagle's* fins touched the ground and the dancing fire of the tubes flickered and died. I felt her sag as she sank slightly into the mushy soil, and then I was cutting the power switches and listening to the slowly descending whine of the gyros as they coasted silkily to a halt.

I looked out of the ports at the miasmic swamp that surrounded us, at the fifty foot ferns in ghastly colors, at the alien, repellent trees that grew pulpy and squat all around the settlement. This was Venus. . . .

VENUSBERG wasn't the great domed city then that it is now. Back in '02 it was just a group of pressurized Quonset huts. There were about sixty men there, mostly maintainance workers and horticulturalists, and five women. Four women were scientists, the fifth Bat Kendo spent his planet-leave with.

The settlers were very cordial with us. I guess we must have been like a breath of the home world to these poor characters who lived there.

I accompanied Captain Reynard on a tour of the cultivated areas and the settlement itself. We were shown how the weather-plant was cultivated and how it gathered nitrogen and water out of the fetid air to deposit it in the soil. We saw how there were always banks of mist over the rows of plants. It gave me quite a shock when I reached down to touch some and the stuff actually shied away from my pressure-suit glove.

"We suspect that the stuff might actually be sentient," the settlement botanist told us.

"You mean the stuff *thinks?*" Captain Reynard demanded.

The botanist laughed. "Oh, no. It's just that when there is a considerable amount of the stuff about it reacts peculiarly. As soon as this ship load of yours gets to Earth, the Foundation staff can really get to work with it and see just what all it can do. We've great hopes for it. It may be the answer to starvation back home."

I looked out over the neat rows of tiny plants that vanished in the misty distance, and I looked too, at the pressing jungle. I began to get a queasy feeling in my stomach. This was alien life. Life that had never been meant for Earth's clean soil. There was no telling what the stuff might do away from here.

"We suspect," the botanist was saying, "that the high formaldehyde content of Venus' atmosphere has an inhibiting effect on the action of the plant. We have isolated small amounts in formaldehyde-free air, and gotten some interesting results. Freed of its native ecology, we believe the stuff can actually create its own weather."

His voice faded away as far as I was concerned. Somewhere in my head a bell was trying to ring. There was something here that was escaping this botanist and Captain Reynard. I couldn't put my finger on it. I had the crazy feeling that something, like the Purloined Letter, was hidden here. Something obvious, something that could be, under the proper circumstances, dangerous.

But I didn't figure it out. Not just then. Not until it was too late. All the clues were there; the plant and the way it could gather

water-vapor and nitrogen, the threat of taking it from its native ecology. Everything. But I didn't tumble. Not until it was too late and the obvious had taken a toll. In lives. . . .

On 23/35/02 Venus Date the *Eagle* was fully loaded and ready for the long haul back up to Earth. The colonists gathered to bid us farewell, and the party was a corker. Bat did his human radar act somewhere along about the time the fifteenth libation was poured. He was at his extra-normal best, telling astounded colonists just what they were doing with their pinkies at ranges up to three hundred yards in pitch darkness. I could have told them that he was almost as good as UVR, but that might have spoiled the effect.

Three hours later we had bid an enthusiastic good-bye to that mushy ball of swamp and stench those poor colonials called home, and the valves sighed shut in the *Eagle's* flanks. The loading cranes pulled away and our own were retracted. The ramp was cleared and the lift-ship alarm blared through the *Eagle.*

The gyros reached operating RPM and I let my hands play over the consoles. The boat shuddered and lifted slowly on a tail of fire. I fed her more power and the accelerometer moved up to 2G. I held her there until we broke out of the clouds and into the crystalline cobalt of the ionosphere. I swung the power lever over and the *Eagle* leaped upward, her needle-nose pointed for home.

We were well past turn-over, in fact just about nineteen hours from Earth when things began happening.

Bat called Control, his voice tense with excitement. "Morley! There's something coming . . . fast! I can feel it!"

I started to ask him what was coming in fast, and whether or not he could "see" it clearly through the metal of the ship, but I never finished. UVR flashed a red alert warning on my control panel . . . and it was the last warning it ever gave.

The panel screeched: "METEOR SWARM!" and went dead. The lights flickered and went out as the *Eagle* bucked and roared in protest. The sound of tearing metal knifed through the hull, and then the whooshing sound of escaping air. Alarm bells clattered futilely—bulkheads slammed. The ship's self-sealing mesoderm saved most of the air, but not before the pressure in the boat dropped from 14.7 down to 6 lbs. per square inch in about two seconds and doubled me up in an agony of aero-embolism. For a long while there was silence, and I fought the glittering knives of pain that seemed to be cutting me into hamburger. Then the lights came back on, dimly. There was still life in the old *Eagle.*

I staggered to my feet and rang the tube-room. A pilot's first instinct is to check the power. No matter what has happened to his ship, if there's power there's hope.

"Morley . . . !" It was Bat calling back through the interphone. "We've had it down here! The sheathing is gone and I've got three men killed!" I could hear the sound of metal sizzling in the background as Bat looked about for more dope to pass on. As it was it looked bad enough. If the sheathing was shot, that meant that he was taking lethal doses of radiation even as he spoke to me.

"Bat!" I shouted, "Bat, you crazy fool! If that place is hot, get out of there!"

I got no reply.

"Bat! That's an order! Put the pile on automatic and get the hell out!"

"No soap, Morley . . ." Bat's voice seemed edged with pain. "You know the autos won't last for more than thirty minutes. Strictly . . . emergency stuff . . ." And then his voice grew even tighter. "The storage, Morley! Those stinking . . . rocks . . . took . . . out . . . the storage! All the thorium went out . . . the side . . . they hit . . . the storage bunker!"

That tore it. Without thorium . . . without even an extra gram . . . the best we could hope for was making it to Earth. Luna and its lovely one-sixth gravity for a crash landing was out.

I tried to get Captain Reynard on the phone, but there was no answer from his quarters. I didn't need a diagram to figure out that he was either dead or so tied up with bends that he couldn't reach the phone.

I started the compressors and the pressure began to build up, but the mesoderm patches wouldn't stand more than 9 lbs. Well, it had to do.

The griping pains eased a bit inside me

and I tried to take stock of the situation. Station by station, I called the crew and assessed the damage. It was plenty.

The whole communications deck was gone and the only radio on board that worked was the tiny panel set in control. The UVR was mangled and so was its crew of four men. Three tubemen had died in the tuberoom and I didn't know how badly Bat might be hurt. No one could enter because the place was hot. The thorium was gone and the sheathing on the pile too. I looked in on the Captain and scratched him off the list. Death from bends is not a pleasant thing to see. The *Eagle* was my command now. As pilot and Second Officer, I took over, for better or worse.

I returned to Control and gave the crew a quick rundown on the situation. Work parties were made up and the wreckage cleared away. The dead—the ones we could find—were wrapped in celoflex and consigned to space. I mumbled a prayer over them as they slipped out into the void. They weren't all Christians, but somehow I had a feeling that they wouldn't mind too much. There's something about the immensity of the cosmos that makes men relinquish their petty prejudices. And when I got back into Control and watched the tell-tales on the Geiger-Muller Counters down in the tuberoom, I said another prayer—for Bat Kendo.

I kept wondering why we had hit that meteor swarm. The normal chances of such an encounter are in the vicinity of a thousand to one. Bits of memory kept tugging at me, but I couldn't get things properly trimmed up until a call from Bat in the tuberoom furnished the key.

"Morley, there's a piece of those damned rocks down here . . . and it's melting!"

Ice! Water! Weather-plant! The pieces of the puzzle began to fit now. The swarm was ice . . . superhard ice . . . tempered by the awful cold of the void. And the weather-plant in the hold—one hundred tons of it—had attracted it hungrily! The plant had more than just an affinity for water! It acted like a magnet! There had probably been nitrogen dissolved in the water, too, and that had added to the plant's attraction!

A sick feeling moved into the pit of my stomach and stayed right there. There was no way of jettisoning the cargo, and there wasn't enough fuel for a try at airless Luna! That meant. . . .

I could hear the Venusian botanist's words echo mockingly in my ears. " . . . we suspect it can create its own weather!"

I knew real fear then. I looked at the great greenish globe of Earth that grew hourly larger beneath us, and shuddered. . . .

SEVENTEEN hours later we were into the ionosphere. My instruments warned that I had just enough thorium left in the pile to keep the *Eagle* up for another hour and ten minutes. The radar was gone, but the weather-plant was fat and healthy.

I tried to pick up a good spot for the landing. The Mojave Desert. Chances for clear weather were better there than anywhere else, though I could guess even then what our chances were.

The *Eagle* shuddered to a vibrating halt, balancing on her tail-flare at about twenty five miles. The gyros were climbing the sonic scale, sending their shrieking whine through every deck of the crippled ship. I looked outside, and cold sweat beaded my face. Even at this height, a fine mist was forming around the *Eagle*.

Freed of Venus' formaldehyde atmosphere, our tons of weather-plant were happily doing their job. Drawing water vapor out of Earth's air. It liked fog. *And it could make its own weather!*

I looked at the chronometer. I had just one hour now to get this ship down through this soup that clung to us—without UVR. I had one hour to do the job or gravity would do it for me.

I let her slip down to fifteen miles and held there, gyros protesting. The mist thickened. I rang the crash alarm, sending all hands who were not actually engaged in the running of the ship to their quarters and the crash-hammocks. My hands were icy cold.

The *Eagle* sank slowly down to five miles and hung there like a ball bouncing on a jet of water. The mist billowed about us, turning radioactive from the vicious lashing of the tail-flare.

I knew that the weather was perfectly clear perhaps two hundred yards away from the ship, but the weather-plant was creating

the soggy weather it liked and I was being effectively blindfolded by the—

Blindfolded!

I grabbed for the interphone. "Bat!' I yelled, "Bat! Can you see anything below?"

Old Bat knew right away what I wanted, but his answer wasn't what I wanted to hear. "Too much metal under me, Morley . . . too much metal." His voice was unsteady and seamed with pain.

I glanced at the chronometer. Thirty seven minutes left. And the fog clung to the ports.

"Morley," Bat sounded something like himself for just a minute. "I've got a notion. Maybe . . . maybe it will work. Break out a pressure suit and get the craneman on the ball. And Morley. . . ." Here I could imagine that he was smiling. " . . . break out a bottle of the skipper's bonded stuff, will you?"

"What are you dreaming up?" I demanded anxiously.

"We have to get this cargo down," Bat said thinly. "You remember what the Foundation man said before we left . . . people need food, Morley. . . ."

"What are you thinking about?" I asked again, and then as realization came, I added angrily: "Never mind that! I know what you're planning Bat, and you can forget it! I'll get this can down all right!"

The voice from the interphone was dry as dust. "Like hell you will. Who are you kidding?"

I had no answer there. Without UVR to guide me, I was blind. I didn't have a chance to get the *Eagle* down, and we both knew it.

"I'm coming up," Bat said, "The automatics can take care of things down here now."

I glanced at the chronometer. Twenty two minutes to go. Bat was right. The autos could carry on in the tuberoom now. I felt them cut into the circuit.

My heart was heavy as I called a craneman into control to handle the equipment. Together we unlimbered a pressure suit from the locker. Then I found the skipper's rations and uncorked a bottle. In a moment Bat was in Control. When I saw him my stomach muscles tightened. He looked as though he'd been broiled. His face was a swollen mass of angry flesh and his clothes were seared into his hide. Every movement must have been sheer hell for him, but he staggered into the suit and made himself fast to the Control crane.

Before calling for the steelglas helmet, he reached thirstily for the skipper's bottle and took a long pull.

"Ahhh," he breathed, "That's fine stuff . . . real fine." He offered me the bottle, grinning painfully. "Have one on me, Morley. . . ."

I LET the fiery liquor drive down the lump that was sticking in my throat and handed Bat the bottle. He finished it in two swallows, looked at it regretfully, and tossed it aside. It landed in the corner of Control where it lay, rocking senselessly back and forth with the jolting movements of the boat.

Bat fastened his helmet on and started for the valve. I wanted to reach out and stop him, but I couldn't. I wanted to say something to him . . . but what? How do you thank a man for buying your life with his own? What do you say to pay a man for his pain and his torture?

That's right. You don't say anything. And neither did I. You just stand there and watch, with your heart a lump of lead inside you. I did that, and no more.

He turned toward me just as the inner valve closed on him and the cable he dragged behind him. "See ya," he said with a clumsy wave. And then he was outside in that radioactive mist of death, riding the crane out and down. Hanging by a thin cable in that stinking fog and using his useless mutational powers to save the hides of his ship and shipmates . . . *and* the load of weather-plant that meant food to the stay-at-homes.

The mass-ratio altimeter gave its last reading—four miles—and then it was through, its sensitive coils thrown out of phase by the mass of the planetary globe under us. Here, now, was where UVR should have taken over.

But there was no UVR. Only a man hanging at the end of a cable in a glowing mist that was burning his last chance of life out of him.

I heard his instructions clearly over the

small panel set. "About three miles up now."

I let the *Eagle* down slowly. Two miles. One. Hold. Three thousand feet. Two. One. Hold. Five hundred feet. Hold. Mojave Desert right under us. Baldy off to the right. Lancaster about twenty miles north. Down easy. . . .

The tail flare was splashing against the desert beneath now, turning the clinging mist into a ruddy shroud. A glance at the chronometer showed about three minutes fuel.

"Let . . . her . . . down . . . slow." Bat's voice was fading fast as the terrific heat seared him and the radiation burned deep.

The fuel should be gone now. No time left. Two hundred feet, one hundred, fifty, thirty. . . .

I heard Bat's voice sob just once through the radio. "Oh . . . dear God. . !" And that was all.

No time. No fuel.

Silence!

The thunder of the jets stopped abruptly, leaving a frightening void. The *Eagle* slewed about sickeningly and dropped the remaining thirty feet like so much lead. There was a rending crash as her tail section crumpled, battered plates sinking into the sand, and then she settled wearily to a halt amid the bubbling magma of atomized earth. . . .

So the pilot-shipment of weather-plant got here all right, and it exceeded the Holcomb Foundation's fondest hopes. It brought fertility where there had been only barrenness. Long rows of it still bring richness and life to the soil and the danger of famine is gone forever.

Just remember now, the next time you take the Pacific stratojet. Look under you at that garden of plenty. See the rows upon rows of richly bearing plants. Look too at the interstices where a tiny Venusian moss called "weather-plant" makes it all possible.

Bat Kendo? He died. He died doing what he wanted to do, and that's something. The others maybe weren't so lucky. Of course you never heard of Bat, or of the *Eagle* for that matter. All this happened a long, long time ago, and the old memories tarnish. Now people take their lives pretty much as they find it, and they never wonder about the guys who made it what it is.

Yes, humans are a strange breed. Like I say . . . forgetful. Very forgetful.

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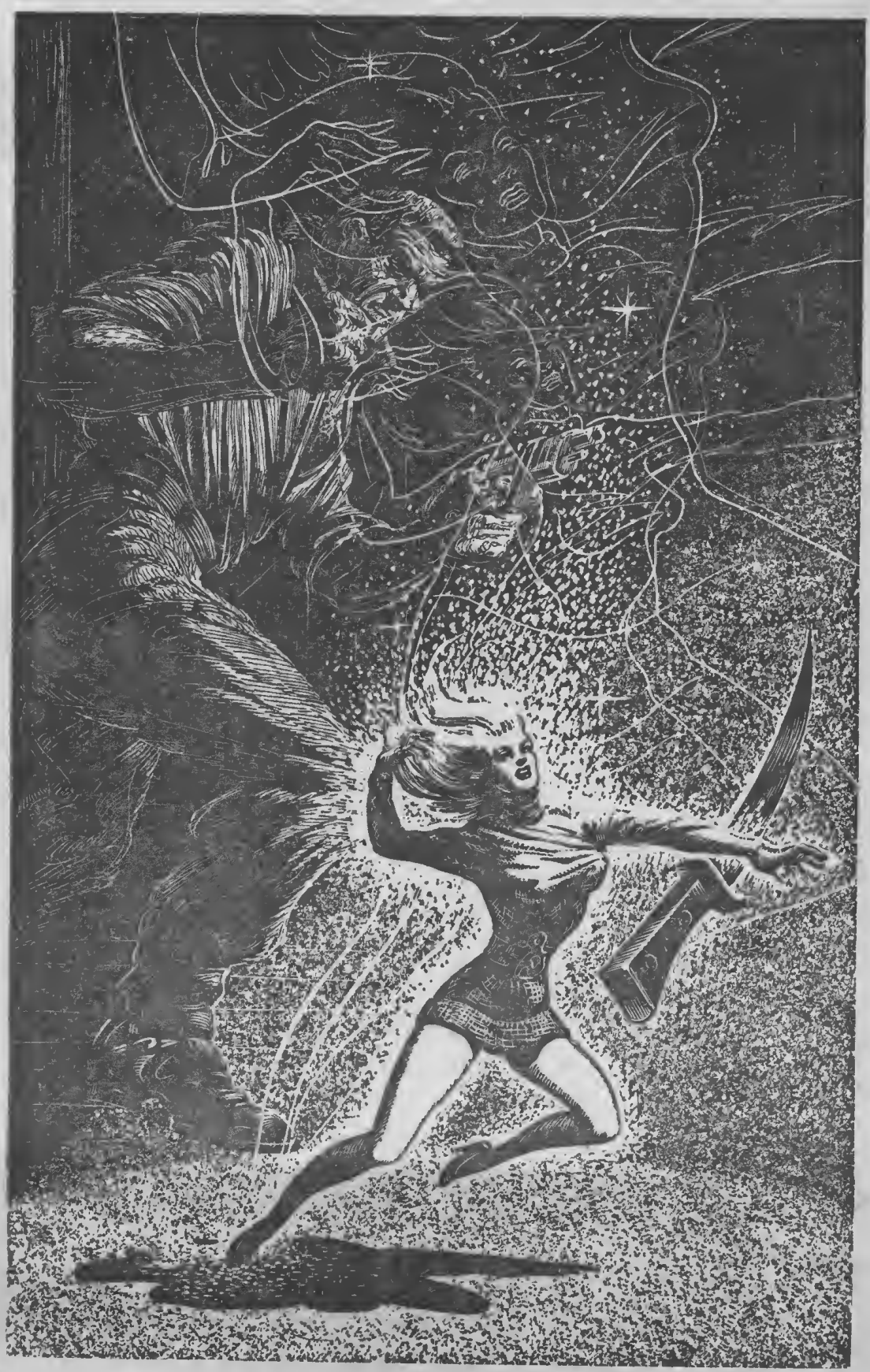


Miss Tweedham's Elogarsn

By ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

The choice was Miss Tweedham's. Either a thlat and freedom—or Malovel and his esse. She chose the latter. Dangerous, yes. But with them came Sanderson, man among men on this desert star.

L'SOR, the Martian, said, "Why don't you humans go back to Earth? You're too soft to stay alive on Mars." He spoke good English but his voice was edged with contempt.

"Maybe you've gone soft in Sandersonville but I haven't," Ed Early answered.

"Bah!" L'Sor said. "You talk big, but Malovel will hold you in the hollow of his hands just as he holds the rest of you humans here. You humans are all alike, big talk but no action."

Early looked startled. "I don't know this Malovel," he said.

"You will know him if you are going to stay here," L'Sor said. "You will know him, and the esse. But I do not think you will remain. I think you will tuck your tail between your legs and go sneaking away like a desert jackal."

Listening, John Sanderson, the boss of Sandersonville, made no effort to interfere. Now was a good time to learn what kind of metal was inside Early and L'Sor was a good instrument for the investigation. The Martian was completely outspoken. Sanderson waited quietly to see what Early would say and do. The woman, Miss Tweedham, was also silent. She watched this scene from startled eyes.

Early had come riding a thlat across the desert, a tough, grim, bitter little man with bluster a foot thick all over him. Sanderson had not asked him his business here. The woman, Miss Tweedham, had arrived in a rocket taxi from the space port. Both of them had been brought to him. At first meeting he had rather liked Miss Tweedham. She was a big woman tired of her work and had come to Mars to find something that had been missing in her life. At the thought, Sanderson shook his head. She would find plenty here!

She would also discover how glad she was that all of it had been missing from her life. Of course, they would have to send her back home, otherwise she would end up running screaming across the deserts toward the space port. In the meantime, she might as well see things as they really were. It would be something to whisper, in a shocked tone of voice, to her best friends when she got back to Earth. He watched her out of the corners of his eyes.

"Who's going to make me tuck my tail between my legs, Fiddlefoot?" Early said angrily.

"Fiddlefoot!" At the word, a violent tremor passed over the Martian. He reached for the knife holstered at his belt. The anger of his race showed in his yellow eyes.

"The man is a fool," Sanderson spoke. "Overlook his words."

"Well, Great One—"

"Let him try to use the knife," Early said, his hand in the pocket of his ragged coat. "I'll make him eat it."

"I wouldn't advise—"

"No fiddlefooted Martian can run a bluff on me. And that goes for this Malovel too."

"Maybe he is not bluffing. He is one of Malovel's priests."

"I don't get this Malovel but what I said still goes, for Fiddlefoot here and his boss, too."

SANDERSON gestured through a window to a terraced slope. Beyond it, mountains rose into the sky. Along the terraces, following the viaducts that brought water downward from the reservoirs above, Martian crops grew green and luxuriant. On the lowest level were the human fields, with the crops drying to stunted stems and twisted leaves. On top of this slope a square structure sprawled. Sanderson gestured toward it.

"Malovel is up there. He is the high priest, the ruler of the Martians here—and of the humans."

"I thought you bossed the humans," Early said.

"Malovel controls the water supply," Sanderson answered.

"Oh, I see!" Understanding gleamed in Early's eyes. "If you don't do what he says, he won't give you the water for irrigation. That's it, huh?"

Sanderson nodded.

"And you put up with this kind of treatment?" Surprise sounded in Early's voice. He studied Sanderson carefully as if he were re-evaluating him.

Again Sanderson nodded.

"Well, I'm damned!" Early said. "John Sanderson putting up with this! John Sanderson letting a local Martian big shot tell him what to do! Oh, I get it now." Again understanding gleamed in Early's eyes. "You've lost your nerve! That's it. Johnny Sanderson has gone soft." Early seemed very pleased with himself for this computation.

The silence that followed was broken by a grunt of contempt from L'Sor. "Give the fool a thlat and send him on his way. We don't want him here."

Early seemed not to hear. "Hah! By heck! So you've lost your nerve! And Sandersonville is hanging here like a ripe peach ready to drop into the pocket of anybody who has the guts to shake the tree! I heard rumors that this had happened but I just didn't believe it."

He pulled an object from his pocket. It was a bum-bum gun. Sanderson seemed not to see it. L'Sor grunted contemptuously.

Miss Tweedham caught her breath. Early moved toward the door.

"Where are you going?" Sanderson said.

"I'm going up and put the fix on this Malovel," Early said. "Then I'm coming back down here and I'm taking over Sandersonville. Johnny Sanderson has lost his nerve and he's through." He stalked through the door.

Through the window, Sanderson watched him go quickly up the slope. In this light gravity, the man walked rapidly. He was soon out of sight. L'Sor and Miss Tweedham moved to Sanderson's side at the window.

"You deliberately needled him into going up there," Miss Tweedham spoke.

"Why should I do that?"

"Maybe because you're scared to go yourself." Her voice had a cutting edge that grated along Sanderson's nerves. Beside him, he heard L'Sor's sharply indrawn breath, a sure sign of rising anger in the Martian.

"Why don't you go to this ruler and demand water?" The schoolteacher continued. "You're the leader here. Are you going to let your people starve?"

Sanderson wiped a thin film of sweat from his face. "Nobody has starved yet."

"How long before 'yet' becomes 'Died of Starvation A.D. 2179' on a tombstone? Or will Malovel let you erect tombstones?"

"He hasn't objected yet."

"Why don't you do something about this?"

"There are two reasons. One is our own bargain, our own agreement. The other is the esse. Malovel has the esse."

"What's the esse?"

"It's a weapon," Sanderson said, uncomfortably. "We don't talk much about it."

"Which means you're scared and don't know what you're afraid of. I still think—EEK!" A gust of sharp, protesting sound exploded from her lips. A hand came up. With her index finger, she made little jabbing motions toward the chair where Early had been sitting.

"What—what is that?" Her voice was suddenly shrill.

A doll, or an old dwarf, or a worn-out elf was sitting in the chair. Miss Tweedham pointed at this. The doll was relaxed and at ease. Its head had fallen forward across its chest. The doll was remarkably life-like. Every hair was visible on the head, each skin wrinkle was clear on the back of the neck. The clothing was ragged, holes showed in the bottoms of the shoes.

"What—what is that?" the woman repeated.

"That's Ed Early," Sanderson said.

"Uh—uh—"

"The esse." L'Sor breathed. "Malovel used the esse."

"Early's dead," Sanderson said. "Quite dead." He stepped forward in time to catch Miss Tweedham before she fell.

IN TRYING to be calm, Sanderson found he needed all of his years of training to grasp even a semblance of what he sought. Behind him, in the bedroom, he could hear Big Marie moving again. The moaning in there had stopped. He tried to distract himself by looking through the window but the sight of the withered crops trying to grow added nothing to the calm he was seek ng. He thought how precarious was the hol l of this little group of humans on Mars—and on life itself.

Two men carrying a small box came into view. The box was small but the men carried it as if it were heavy. The esse shrunk the size but did not reduce the mass. In the box, Early weighed just as much as he had ever weighed but he would not take up as much room in the graveyard.

Behind Sanderson the bedroom door opened. He turned quickly. Big Marie stood there. Her dark face was sullen.

"How is she?"

"She's all right. It was a strain on her, suddenly seeing him sitting there the size of a doll when the last time she had seen him he had been a full-sized man going up the slope."

"It always is a strain the first time you see it. Will she be all right?"

"Yes. Maybe her dreams won't be so good for a while. Why did she come here?"

"I didn't ask her."

Big Marie stared steadily at him. "What is she to you, John?"

"Nothing. She just arrived."

"If she becomes anything to you I will kill her," Big Marie said calmly.

"Damn it, Marie, I've got enough trouble on my hands without you trying to blow a fuse. If I want the woman, I'll take her. If I don't want her, I won't take her. Is that clear?"

"Ain't I enough for you?"

"You're enough for ten men. I'm thinking of establishing polyandry here, just for your sake. But—Well, hello." Miss Tweedham came through the door. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm alive, I guess." Her face was pale but composed, her walk was steady. "That awful thing." A shudder passed across her face. "How did it get back there in the chair without us seeing it coming?"

"Elogarsn, the Martians call such trips. Humans know it as telportation."

"But what is it?"

"You've got a word for it, what more do you want?"

"Nothing, I guess." She looked from Big Marie to Sanderson. "There was some talk about taking a woman. Were you talking about me?"

"What do you think?"

"I think I may have something to say about it."

"Then say it." Sanderson waited for the woman to speak. She looked confused, but did not answer.

"He is not really this hard," Big Marie said. "It is just that he is worried."

"Don't apologize for me."

The door opened and L'Sor entered without knocking. "They told me I would find you here," he said. "Malovel will see you at once."

"All right, I'm coming," Sanderson said. He turned to the door.

"Wait a minute," Miss Tweedham protested. "Do you mean you're going to—after what you just saw, you're going to—"

"What did I just see?" Sanderson said. He went out. L'Sor followed him without comment.

Miss Tweedham's lips formed unvoiced sounds. "But—that awful Martian may kill him."

"Do you think that would stop him?" Big Marie said. "What kind of a man do you think he is?"

"I don't care what kind of a man he is."

"He has kept us alive when nobody else could have done it," Big Marie said. "If he says he wants you, Baby, my advice is to play give-inee." Big Marie went into the bedroom and closed the door behind her. It opened again an instant later. "You'll be the luckiest woman this side of heaven." The door slammed shut this time.

MALOVEL was old and wrinkled. His skin hung about his face in loose folds and his hands were the skinny claws of a bird. He slept, ate, and defecated in the big padded chair that was his throne. Under the bird-talon fingers a number of differently colored squares were set into the arms of the chair.

Officious priests in blue robes took Sanderson to him. L'Sor was not invited to accompany them and he did not request the privilege.

Malovel went straight to the heart of the matter. "There will be no more water for humans," he said. A slave standing beside his chair gave him a sip out of a small cup. His yellow eyes twinkled at the human.

"Eh? What?" Sanderson gasped. "Holy One! A bargain was made."

"What bargain?"

"That the humans would keep the peace and that the Holy One would see that we have adequate water for our fields. Other services of mutual advantage to both sides were included. Thus the humans taught the Martians how to raise grain from Earth, and supplied them—"

"Who made this bargain?" Malovel said.

"Does not the Holy One remember? He and I made it four years ago when the human settlement was started here."

A flicker of surprise passed through Malovel's eyes. The slave hastily placed the cup to his lips. He sipped the red liquid.

"Oh, yes, I remember now." The tone of his voice said that remembering was a matter of no importance. "I have changed my mind. There will be no more water for humans."

"But Holy One—"

"I have spoken. Does the human wish to dispute me?" Malovel's bird-talon fingers went eagerly to the squares on the arms of the chair. An eager look crept into his yellow eyes.

The slob is hoping I will defy him so he

can have the pleasure of using the esse on me, Sanderson thought. Aloud he said: "Your will is our highest law, Holy One."

Regret showed on the Martian's face. "Then be gone, all of you, by the next rising of the sun." The fingers remained on the square as if Malovel was still treasuring a lingering hope that this human would defy him.

"Yes, Holy One," Sanderson said. Backing out of the audience hall, he wondered how even Malovel expected them to be gone by tomorrow even if they had a place to go! Inhospitable deserts surrounded them, making impossible a flight across Mars. Earth would welcome them back—if they could get there—but not a man or a woman here would welcome Earth.

Returning to the human settlement he saw that all work had stopped and that everyone was waiting for him. The news that he had been summoned to Malovel had gotten around. "Meeting right away," he said to each man he met. The drift to the assembly hall began immediately.

He stood in front of them, a tall man with bitterness on his face. Less than a hundred humans looked up at him, all who lived here. He did not have to ask for silence. The men and the women who entered here showed no inclination to talk.

"We have until tomorrow to leave," he said.

Silence continued in the big room. These people had already braced themselves against bad news.

"If you ask me why we have to leave, I can only tell you it is by order of Malovel. If you ask me why he gave this order, I can only say he is an old, tired, worn-out ruler, who is kept alive only by his greed for power. What better way to demonstrate his power than by ordering the humans to leave?"

He paused, took a deep breath. "We made a bargain with him. He has violated the agreement. This ties up the package. All rules are off."

At the words, a gust of something seemed to run through the room. It was partly sound, but more than anything else, it was pure emotion, a blast of it.

"What is happening?" Miss Tweedham whispered to Big Marie.

"He's turning loose his dogs," Big Marie answered. "Almost tamed, all of them were, until he turned them loose. Now they're pure wolf."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You'll find out, Baby," Big Marie said.

FROM the front of the room Sanderson's voice caught her ears, pulling her attention to him.

"All of you know that we have sincerely hoped that this would not happen. However, we have always considered the possibility that it might happen. Thus, we have made our plans down to the last detail."

Again the thin buzz and the blast of emotion went through the room.

"Miss Tweedham," Sanderson spoke. "Come forward, please."

His voice lifted her to her feet and took her to the front of the room. "Yes? What do you want?"

His face made a smile. "Since you are new here, and not one of us, you will want to leave."

She was confused. She felt it inside her and it showed on her face.

"It is impossible to call a taxi from the space port. We do not have radio facilities. However, we can provide a thlat for you to ride, and food and water for a week. In that time you can reach the space port. It will not be a comfortable trip but it will be more comfortable than staying here."

"I—is that—"

"I'm sorry but this is the best we can offer you. Our facilities here are primitive."

"What happens if I don't want to leave?" Miss Tweedham blurted out.

"Eh?" Sanderson was startled. He looked again at this rather big woman with the pleasant, tolerant face. "Do you mean that?"

"Would I say it if I didn't mean it?"

"Well—" Sanderson coughed. "In that case, you will be assigned duties."

"I'll take the duties."

"Without asking what they will be?" He seemed suddenly uneasy, and yet at the same time he seemed pleased.

"Yes."

He blinked at her, then nodded as if he was even better pleased. "Take your turn in line, please."

Men were already moving to the front of the hall. They lifted a large slab of stone from the floor there, revealing a box-filled cavity beneath. A man dropped down and began to hand up the boxes. A line was forming. Miss Tweedham moved into it. Sanderson was taking small objects from the boxes and was handing one to each person in line. Miss Tweedham did not see what the objects were until one was handed to her. Then she saw.

"But these are bum-bum guns!" she said. She did not take the weapon.

"Yes, they are," Sanderson said.

"That man, Early, had one of these."

"Yes, he did."

"It didn't do him any good."

"No, it didn't."

"Move on, Baby, you're holding up the line," Big Marie said.

Miss Tweedham took the bum-bum gun.

"Do you know how to operate it?" Sanderson said.

She turned the weapon in her fingers. "Yes, I know how to use it."

"Eh?" Sanderson seemed startled.

"Move on, Baby," Big Marie said again. Miss Tweedham moved on. Big Marie took a bum-bum gun. In addition, she requested a knife. From another box Sanderson supplied her with a blade ten inches long. She tested the edge on her thumb. "I'll have to hone it," she said.

"Be sure you remember whose throat you are to cut," Sanderson said.

"I won't forget that."

"It isn't my throat," Sanderson said.

"Isn't it?" Big Marie answered.

When the guns and knives had been distributed, Sanderson opened another box. Maps were in it. They were crudely but clearly drawn. He distributed them to a number of key men. "You will find detailed instructions here for you and your group. I don't suppose I need to remind you of the consequences of failure."

Again the buzz ran through the room.

"You seem to have everything well organized," Miss Tweedham said:

"Organization was my line before I came to Mars," Sanderson answered. He lifted his voice. "Deimos is the signal. When it rises above the horizon tonight, we go into action."

The buzz grew louder. To Miss Tweedham, it sounded like a swarm of angry hornets.

SEEMING to be a part of the night, four figures crouched against the wall beside the closed door. Bright stars twinkled overhead. In this thin air there seemed to be millions of stars sprinkled like arc lights in the sky.

Miss Tweedham clutched the bum-bum gun and listened to the sound of her own heart. Beside her, Big Marie leaned against the wall in nonchalant ease. On the other side of her, Sanderson and the Martian L'Sor whispered quietly.

"Is that Martian all right?" Miss Tweedham said to Big Marie.

"If he ain't, we're in the soup."

"But how do we know?"

"We don't. John Sanderson trusts him. That's enough for me. And anyhow, if it hadn't been for L'Sor, we would never have learned enough about the esse to stand a chance against it."

Miss Tweedham made choking sounds as a vision of the doll came up before her eyes so real she could see it all over again.

On the horizon a light appeared. Deimos rising. It was not an impressive sight. Outlined against the arc lights of the stars, Deimos hung in the sky like a glow worm at the Feast of the Lanterns.

"The door, L'Sor," Sanderson said.

The Martian inserted a key in the slot. The door opened into a courtyard. The four passed through.

"Big Marie, you and Miss Tweedham are to stay here and guard this door. L'Sor and I will be returning this way."

"Yes, John."

The two women crouched against the wall. Sanderson and the Martian moved across the courtyard and vanished. Then Big Marie moved. "You stay here and guard this door. I'm going after them. Those two damned fools have assigned themselves the job of tackling Malovel and the esse all alone."

For a few minutes Miss Tweedham stayed beside the door. Then, clutching her bum-bum gun, she followed Big Marie.

At night, the big throne chair was moved into the sleeping quarters. Malovel dozed

fitfully in it. A slave was constantly beside him, always ready to pass the precious liquid to lips as parched as the fields the humans were trying to cultivate. Through thin gauze curtains, female slaves could be seen sleeping in the adjoining room. They were at Malovel's beck and call but he had long since passed the stage where they were of any use to him.

He existed now as almost pure hate. All that kept him alive was his hatred of all creatures more nearly alive than he was. Martians, humans, the sand jackals howling in the deserts, he hated them all because they were what he was not—alive.

As he dozed, his fingers played over the squares in the arms of his chair. He dreamed of using the esse. Even in sleep his hate yearned to express itself.

A stir sounded at the door as his private guard challenged a wall watcher bringing information to him. The sound aroused him, irritated him. The wall watcher insisted on being brought before him.

"What is it?"

The tone sent shivers through the wall watcher. But he thought his news was important. "Holy One, I heard footsteps outside the walls."

Malovel considered this information. If it was true, he didn't like it. If it was untrue, he liked it even less. Most of all he disliked having his sleep interrupted.

"Fool! Some lover goes to his mistress and you interrupt my rest because of this!"

"But—Holy One—"

"Out of my sight."

The wall watcher hastily backed from the room. Malovel watched. Some residue of his dream remained in his mind. His fingers moved on the squares. A throb sounded in the room. The wall watcher screamed. Invisible fingers seemed to come out of nowhere and seize him. The fingers pressed against him with terrific force. He began to shrink in size. When he was the size of a doll, Malovel shifted his fingers on the squares. The doll was lifted upward and out of the room.

Malovel settled back in his chair. The slave hastily pressed the cup to his lips. He sucked greedily at the red liquid. Strength surged up in him. It came as much from the satisfaction of seeing the wall watcher die as from the red syrup. He had destroyed a wall watcher! He was a mighty killer! Who dared to oppose him?

His eyes circled the room, seeking any one who dared to oppose him. Beside his chair, the male slave froze. Beyond the thin curtains, the shivering females stopped moving.

Slowly, Malovel settled back into his chair. Again he dozed. This time there was satisfaction in him and he slept better than before. Beside him, the male slave dared to breathe again. His private guards went on tiptoe from the room. The females huddled down against the pillows and tried to sleep.

Sounds came from inside the building. A Martian shouted. The shout went into quick silence as soft phuts sounded.

A breathless palace guard again insisted on being admitted to Malovel's presence. The guards at the door told him what had happened to the wall watcher. The guard insisted his report was true and important. He was permitted to enter. Again Malovel awakened.

"The humans are in the palace, Holy One."

"What?"

"You can hear them."

Listening, Malovel caught an echo of a shout, then a burst of phuts. For a second he was startled. Then a gleam appeared in his eyes. As he had thought they would if he stopped the water for the fields, the humans had attacked the palace. Now he had a chance to use the esse again, to taste to the full the surge of power that came to him when he used that weapon.

At his word of command, the slave swung up in front of him what looked like a frosted mirror but which revealed what was happening where he sent the esse. The mirror showed a corridor, with Martians and humans fighting there.

A look of vast satisfaction appeared on Malovel's face. He caressed the squares on the arms of his throne chair.

"Once a bargain was made, Holy One," a voice said behind him.

Malovel spun in his chair. He stared in horror at what he saw there. The human, Sanderson, and the Martian, L'Sor. A Martian traitor! Behind them a secret door was

open in the wall, a relic of the long-gone days when Malovel had used that exit. He had forgotten its existence. But L'Sor had smelled it out. Both the human and the Martian held the little weapons that the humans called bum-bum guns. L'Sor's weapon menaced the slave, who stood motionless.

"A bargain was made four years ago," Sanderson said.

"I changed my mind."

"Why?"

"Perhaps to start this fight, to give myself the pleasure of destroying you."

As he spoke, Malovel's fingers pressed a square. The human might be fast with the bum-bum gun but the esse was faster than any human action, as fast as light itself. As Malovel pressed the square, the esse formed.

A scream sounded in the room. Sanderson was shoved to one side. The esse caught something, Malovel did not quite see what it was. He poured power into it. Malovel caught a glimpse of the doll forming as the mighty fingers of the esse squeezed life from it.

A glimpse was all he caught. A bum-bum slug splashed his head over the room. The eager glow in his eyes seemed to turn into a yellow aura then lingered a second after he was gone. Then it went too.

MISS TWEEDHAM went forward as quickly as she could. When the shouts and the phuts began, she was afraid, but she was even more afraid of losing sight of Big Marie. Then Big Marie did disappear. Miss Tweedham clutched her gun and waited, her heart up in her throat. A scream rang out ahead of her. The sound moved her forward and into the throne rooms of Malovel.

Malovel, headless, was lying stretched across his throne chair.

Staring down at something, Sanderson was kneeling on the floor. Miss Tweedham moved to his side, saw the object at which he stared.

He glanced up at her, nodded toward the object on the floor. "She shoved me out of the way and the esse got her. I had no idea it was that fast." His voice was tight with suppressed feelings.

"Back on Earth she killed two men. That was why she came to Mars. She died here, saving the life of a third man." Sanderson's face was wry and twisted.

The object on the floor was a doll with the features of Big Marie.

"Great One, work remains," L'Sor urged.

Sanderson rose. He lifted the body of Malovel from the throne chair, threw it across the room. Then he seated himself in the chair and began to study the controls. In the distance shouts sounded, Martians and humans locked in battle. The shouting of the Martians went into quick silence as Sanderson began to operate the controls on the arms of the chair.

A little later the humans were crowding into the room. They were a motley lot. Some were covered with blood, others carried arms in improvised slings, one supported himself between two companions. They looked at the occupant of the throne chair and began to grin.

"Well done, boys," John Sanderson said. "I never pulled a sweeter, cleaner, tougher job."

The room echoed with the fierce shouting of triumphant men.

Miss Tweedham went away.

When Sanderson found her, the stars were going down and the day was coming. Clutching her purse in one hand and the bum-bum gun in the other, she was seated on a bench outside the house where Big Marie had once lived. Sanderson came up. She moved and made room for him and he sat down beside her.

"Look," he said, pointing. "Water is coming down the ditches to our fields."

Miss Tweedham could see the water. Already the crops were responding to the magic touch of it. She could also see the glow on John Sanderson's face. The glow on his face was one of the nicest sights she had ever seen in her life. A man watching water come to parched fields. . . .

"But I imagine you had a rather exciting night," he said, turning to her.

"Yes. Yes. It was that."

"Well, you will forget the horror of it. Maybe you can even learn to have fun telling your classes back on Earth about the wild night you spent on Mars." He grinned at her. "I don't know how you're fixed fi-

nancially, but if you're broke, I imagine we can find passage money among us."

Miss Tweedham clutched her purse. "But what if I don't want to go back to Earth?"

His voice was gentle but with overtones of pain in it. "This is no place for a woman like you, a woman of refinement and culture."

"Why not?" she asked.

"Don't you know the truth about us yet?" he said, surprised. "Haven't you guessed it? None of us can go back to Earth. We're wanted men there."

"Criminals?" Miss Tweedham said, flinching.

"Yes." Sanderson choked over the word but he got it out.

"And what were you back on Earth?"

"I ran the Syndicate," Sanderson answered.

"Then that explains your genius for organization."

"I had had some experience in organization before I came here," Sanderson said, grimly. "That was why the boys made me boss. Now as to your return to Earth—"

"As I said before, maybe I don't want to go back."

Sanderson stared at her. "But you have to go back. You don't belong here."

"Maybe I came here for the same reason you and all the others came. Maybe I knew what I was coming to. Maybe I chose this place deliberately."

"What?" Sanderson gasped.

Miss Tweedham faced him without flinching. "You haven't asked me what I really was back on Earth."

"Eh? A school teacher—"

"You still haven't asked me."

"Eh? What were you?"

"A call girl," Miss Tweedham answered, without flinching.

"Uh—ah—"

"I'm not going back to that," Miss Tweedham said.

Sanderson sought for words. He stuttered them out. "Do—do you—do you think you will ever be a call girl again?"

"Only when you call," Miss Tweedham answered.

In the light of the coming dawn, John Sanderson's face showed beet red. Then, slowly, he began to grin. His eyes lifted from her, his gaze went to the fields where now the water was flowing in the irrigation ditches. "That's wonderful," he said.

Miss Tweedham did not know whether he was talking about what she had said, or the water bringing life to the parched fields. She decided that whatever he was talking about, the meaning was the same in the end.

"I'm going to see about the water," he said, rising.

She smiled. Deep in her heart she knew he was going there to feel the new growth beginning. When he was too far away to see what she was doing, she opened her purse. From it, she took a piece of stiff folded paper.

Lifetime Teaching Certificate, the paper said.

Slowly, Miss Tweedham tore the paper into tiny bits. She watched the dry, restless wind of Mars blow them away. Then she rose and followed John Sanderson toward the growing fields.

The Un-Reconstructed Woman

By HAYDEN HOWARD

At first Paul wished fervently for the return of the Doric. But now . . . now that he was getting to know and understand this strange, blue-tressed vision? ? ? ?

A FEW long bones in the fallen leaves with the shadows of the tree dancing, a glint of gold where the jawbone sat beneath the nameless tree—

"Look at the char marks on that rib!" the young man exclaimed. "So they had heat guns back then."

"That wasn't so long ago." The old man peered up at Paul's face. "They stole 'em from a government arsenal. That's how they was able to massacre so many colonies. That wasn't so long ago. I watched that man drive his uniharvester out of the ship. I even remember that gold tooth shining in his mouth."

"But this is an Earth tree, a peach maybe; they planted it; look how tremendous it's grown." He liked to tease the old man. "It took a long, long time."

It seemed to be the only Earth-life that remained. But a mouse rustled through the leaves and confounded Paul. And he did not see the old man staring beyond the tree, jaw open.

And the old man was hesitant to tell Paul what he had seen.

As they climbed the opposite hill that hid the ship Paul kicked questioningly at the drums that had contained nitrogen-fixing bacteria. He raised the rusty hood of the tractor. He stopped and went into the shed again, a lot of freeze boxes in there. The way the mines on the outer planets were booming, no fresh vegetables for them, these people would have been rich by now.

As he ran past the old man, his voice rang loud in that silent world: "I could fix that generator."

Its power pile had given his chest geiger a friendly buzz. If his brother Harry was alive—

Over the hill the spaceship poised like a monument.

To every man who ever died away from home, Paul thought as he ran over the leaves. Harry brother, there she stands, boy.

She was going. Already tiny figures were dismantling the well rig. They had refilled the tanks with water, the fist for the mighty arm that was the power pile. The heat exchanger was the wrist. The steam, disassociated into H and O by the manmade sun, would provide the mass to push back, pushing them forward to a rock in the sky where there might be heavy metals and there might not. While more efficient expansion compounds were used by the military, water was most practical for poor men who went shares.

"What would it take to own this land, Cap?" Paul gasped while his arm swept in endless rolling hills and many-shadowed valleys. One sun was nuzzling the horizon so the air was red with afternoon. The suns arranged it so there was no night.

"A fool," retorted the elected captain and he slammed the crowbar against the oxidation on the fin.

Above this continuing racket, Paul shouted: "A smart guy could get richer here than on one of those damned rocks."

The old man's voice came between blows. "You won't get rich anywhere." He said something Paul couldn't hear. "— not the type." He smiled as though it were a compliment. "But if you're thinking of watch-

toood.

ing peaches ripen—" The hammering drowned him out. "—and the drooling lip because that's what men get all alone on alien planets."

"Not me. Hey Cap, lay off for a minute. My folks homesteaded Syrtis Major. Before they shipped Harry and me off to school, I had the proverbial green thumb," he grinned. "Sure, get rich here and spend it for psycho treatments," the captain laughed. He was not familiar with what is called in small children at least, the negativistic reaction.

THE old man, who still felt uncomfortable from what he might have seen on the hill, reinforced this with a mutter: "Only man in a world, with a hole for a belly and a spook for a shoulder."

To his own surprise almost as much as theirs, Paul set his feet firmly. "I'm going to cash in my sixteenth of this space coffin for supplies we got for the Mormon colony on Smith. I'll get rich here!"

The captain grew patient, then he grew angry. The rest gathered around, fifteen shareholders to one. But Paul would not pull in his neck. In a brawl on Mars while they were loading for the Outer Systems, the fifteen had seen him nearly kill a Guardsman with his feet and fists. Since Harry's death he was a terror. Also they would have only fifteen ways to split if he stayed here. Like all spacebums, they knew THIS time they would hit it rich.

Afterward, Paul stowed the seeds and hatching eggs in the dead freezeboxes where the mice could not get at them, reclimbed the hill to the peach tree, at least he thought it was peach, and made a little hole for the bones. A libation to the dead colonists he poured on the leaves, then swigged one for Harry, a third for himself, wondering what the old man had started to tell him when he slipped him the bottle. Probably that he would never get rich.

Blinking, he lazed on his back. When his face nuzzled the leaves, bean rows sprang higher than a man, leghorns were scratching everywhere and the spacemen came with bright sheaves of credits in their fists. The bean rows spread beyond the horizon and the dust of plowing tractors rose like smoke against the sky, while Paul and Harry, hardly distinguishable, for Paul was only three minutes older, proudly led a ragged old man and a slack-jawed captain through the flowering avenue of peach trees.

"Now you must meet my wife," said Paul, and he squirmed uncomfortably on the leaves.

He awoke bolt upright with his automatic pointing. Wind? Of course. He repeated the thought as he circled the hill on the double. A chip of damp leaves, dark side up with alien things dragging their larvae from the sun, down the slope another, he pursued scars in the leaves over the hill, down, lost the trail in the dry watercourse, zig-zagging, circling like a hound dog, found it again. Ran. His leg muscles were soft from months without gravity. Steep hills. Rollercoasters. Winded.

Resting, listening to his heart, listening, smiling: the mouse was not the largest fauna in his private world. Doubtless the thing that ran like a man was hills and valleys ahead, a world to hide in. As he trudged back to the shed he was not afraid, his heart was thumping, a-hunting we will go.

He was listening and watching the hills while he strung the electric fence to keep out the mice. He was listening while he cleaned out a room in the old supply shed. He listened in his sleep, even after he had stretched alarm trip wires criss cross beneath the leaves and planted nooses with the sliding catch deer poachers use. Although he did not expect to hold the thing, since it surely would have more intelligence than a deer, he might get a look at it, a flick of time in which he could decide whether to shoot.

The snares worked as he was sometimes to think afterward too well. The afternoon he charged into a world of shrieks and crashing leaves and saw a bronzed, hair-whirling fury, her leaf-clotted mane glinted blue in the sunlight, straining from the humming wire with the self-destroying terror of a filly trapped in a cattle guard, he stared, then ran for the wire snips. When he cautiously approached he saw the wire had bitten deep into her ankle. As she squawled, she was beating the leaves with blood. It would be many afternoons before she would run again, if ever. If he loosed this lone thing now, she would die.

Once, on Mars, he shot a sand lizard that wriggled into a crevasse and would take a long time to die. To him, although it must be waiting in the darkness with yawning jaws, there was nothing for him to do but inch down and finish the mess he had begun.

So he went back to his room for a blanket. Holding it open before him, he edged toward the snarling, drooling animal that backed away along the circle of its tether, leaving blood and liquid on the leaves. It stunk, it made him gag from excitement and the rank odor of its sweat and hate. He wanted to run and never come back, for he could not finish it like a sand lizard, it was going to be snarling and watching until the *Doric* rescued him, took it away, and that would be six months!

ITS hard bones thrashing beneath the blanket frightened him. He yelled as its teeth found his knee. He swung his fist to dislodge it, for it was no more female to him than is a bitch fox in a trap. It was a fearful thing, outside his experience, and he moaned as he lay across it, plucking at the snare, staring at the blue, dirt-grained foot with broad yellow nails, until the noose widened and it tried to crawl beneath him like a tortoise. Then he bundled it up, it was no heavier than a whining bundle of sticks, and ran into his room, where, after carefully wrapping the snapping head, he bound the hands and feet and tied it by a sheet about its middle to the bed. After opening the window to clear the stench, he sat on its legs and, wincing each time it squawled, washed and disinfected its ankle.

Whipping off the head rag so it could breathe more softly, he fled outside and watched it through the window. It was a bird cage and knife blades tightly wrapped in brown, scruflous skin, with little pools of sweat in the hollows and sticks for legs and arms. There was a purple, imperfectly healed tear above its navel. It was past puberty. Its present condition might be excused by fright, but he had a sickening suspicion it was not housebroken.

Its huge deep eyes seemed to swallow him. When it shrieked, he jumped and retreated into the sunlight where he nursed his flask, muttering, "Six months, six months. Harry, what did I ever do to deserve this? Six months, just me and it."

After he had pulled himself together, he marched inside, blanketed the head so it couldn't watch him, took a detergent, a rag and a bucket of water and began to scrub away layers of grease and filth. "Shut up," he yelled, "I don't like this either. One job I never asked for was attendant in a lunatic asylum." But he was wise enough to consider that until he trapped her from her own environment she was probably no more insane than a fox is insane. How she would adjust herself to her new life he did not know. Was it possible that with certain skills, if you didn't learn them young, you could never learn them?

He welded a cage from pipe the Ventura settlers left and carried her out to it. Trying to ignore her screams, he bundled her in and welded the last two bars in place. After he dexterously freed her hands without being bitten, he was disappointed, for she seemed too stupid to untie her feet. The first time he tried to help her, he leaped away with blood streaming down his cheek; she had come within a half inch of taking his eye.

When the breeze came up, he saw she bristled with cold. She shrank from the blanket he proffered. What did she do, burrow in the leaves? After pacing up and down and swearing to himself, he got a hammer and crowbar and pried a wall off his room. He dragged her cage inside and nailed the wall up again, while she shrieked and shook the bars so the little cage thumped on the floor.

When he set a cup of water inside the bars, she shrank into the far corner of the cage. When he drank from it himself and smacked his lips, she squawled and turned her face away. He replaced the cup and waited outside. He heard her knock it over. With raised eyebrows, he fitted a frying pan through the bars and poured water into that, but all day she did not drink.

When he went out to the land he was spading, he heard her strike the pan as she had the cup, then scream with pain. Then he heard the pan clanging against the bars. Apparently she was not so weak as she looked. He was searching for excuses to put off what he would have to do if she would not eat.

The next day his attempts at forcefeeding

netted him a finger bitten to the bone and numerous scratches even though he had drawn her tightly against the bars with a coiled sheet. Whether she had taken anything he could not tell. What had gone down when he held her nostrils seemed about equal to what leaped out against his shirt front.

The third day she was weaker, more a huge-eyed, painful what-ever-it-was than the fierce, stinking animal he found in the snare. She would not eat. He considered loosing her, but he knew under best conditions her margin of survival must be slight. She would crawl away and die. She was his fault.

With considerable imagination, he rummaged in his kit until he found some rubber gloves. After tying her against the bars, he forced a sleeping pill between her jaws and held them shut between his knee and arm while he dammed her mouth with his hand. When she began to relax, he pried loose three of the bars, quickly poured a solution of nutrient tablets into the rubber glove, pricked a hole in the thumb and wriggled into the cage, almost filling it. While he held her head so she would not see him if she opened her eyes, very gently he began her training.

Sometimes he would sing to her, and she would smile. Gradually he saw himself transformed in her eyes from the horrible thing that gives fear and pain to something that gives food.

By the time her limp was gone, he could take her into the garden without a leash. Smiling, for she rarely made a sound unless hungry or angry, she would stand where he wanted to spade and watch his eyes. So the garden did not go so well as he had planned, although he reassured himself that when the *Doric* had taken her to Earth where she could be properly trained there would be plenty of time to fill the freezers and grow rich; he was young yet.

WHILE she watched everything he did with intense interest, she seemed discouragingly stupid. She learned to speak only a few words, although she understood a good many of the simple commands he gave her and went through a stage when she was quick to obey them. Her own chirps, he discovered had a certain internal logic. And before he realized it she had imposed her language system on him. They got along quite well this way, since they did not bother to hold symposiums on art or science, but he began to worry about what she would do when she came into the uncompromising atmosphere of an institution.

Probably throw a tantrum the way she did when I slapped her for eating baby chicks, he thought. He could understand her feeling, for to her they must have seemed as intended for eating as the mice she sometimes caught and crunched with delight.

As the months crept by she seemed to lose her awe of him. She would not sweep or hoe without whining. His imperative voice had to be reinforced with a slap to make her obey.

He was worrying about this on a walk one day, far down the valley where the peach tree grew, when she ran to him waving a human pelvis and smiling and chirping.

"Don't smile," he said, talking now as he would talk to a dog. "That was probably your mother. What I think is that a woman, your grandmother, escaped with several children, one of them your mother. But your grandmother died very soon and the children were afraid of the shack for some reason, for I have found no signs of them there, and they hunted through the woods like wild things and forgot what they knew. They bred you at least. Then they died while you were quite small, perhaps five or six years old, and you forgot whatever was left to forget of man's five hundred thousand years of cumulative learning. It isn't like instinct; it can all be lost like that!" He snapped his fingers in her face.

He made her throw the bone away before they reached home. He suspected that some things like language, if not learned when the organism is young, might always prove difficult. He thought of stories of wolf children and of how they soon died when placed in institutions.

As she danced before him, he noticed how prettily she was filling out. The conviction that she had better have a dress and soon, hit him like an axe blow. He began to watch the trees, the sky, the ground.

He made it from one of his shirts, and

she squawled with fright when he slipped it over her head. Whenever she started to take it off, he would speak sharply to her. But she had a strong will. Soon he was forced to chase her and slap her to make her obey. She would pretend to pull it off just to tease him and one day when he was burning leaves she threw it on the fire and fled.

Although he made her another and decorated it with bottle caps in the hope that since historians claimed dress began as decoration she too would see the light. It was too late to change her original dislike, even though he paraded around in it and pretended to be very proud of himself. It was war after that. She smiled knowingly when he told her bugs would bite her if she didn't wear it or that a great ship would come out of the sky and take her away. The dress was off as much as it was on.

Normally she would accept whatever he said, but not when it had to do with the dress. She didn't like it. It made her itch and sweat. It was her enemy. And when he allied with it he was too.

She was a beautiful animal when she was angry.

Now he was in a haste for the sixth month to come. For as he often told her: "I've loused you up and you've loused me up enough as it is."

At sleeping time, his dreams of beautifully gowned women leaning over the piano and beckoning, bending in velvet curves to refill his glass, dancing up to him with their arms outstretched, standard spacemen's dreams, no longer gave him pleasure because he could never be sure when they disrobed in their softly lit apartments that they might not turn revealed, the nameless girl.

When the afternoon was cold, she would creep beneath his blanket and, because he couldn't bear her shocked expression when he shoved her out, he would turn his face to the wall and review navigation problems. It was true, the way the farm was going, he'd probably end back with the space bums never knowing which vector series was correct.

WHEN the seventh month passed, he began to worry. The *Doric* couldn't go much longer without supplies. If they'd hit it rich, they'd still have to send the ship back, they would have to add water on his planet; then they would take the girl to Earth and he could breathe again.

Now when she ran suddenly and threw her arms about him, it was quite plain she was not motivated by childish affection. He began to take long walks, to try hiding from her, for she pestered him continually. He would run away until his lungs were bursting and hear a little chirp and she would be peering around a tree, without her dress of course.

"You're like a deer through the woods," he'd laugh, for she would smile so prettily that all the anger drained out of him. Then she would crawl forward pretending she was stalking a mouse and he would jump up and start walking again.

She learned nothing these days, in fact he thought she was less capable than a month ago. She helped him gather seeds as usual and then, when he sent her to feed the chickens, he discovered she was chewing the seeds herself, although he fed her whenever she patted her stomach. One morning his favorite young rooster was gone, but he found its feet on top of the empty freezers and the woods were adrift with feathers.

He asked her and she nodded and covered her face with her skirt. "Why?" he asked, "Hungry?" She shrugged; all of her gestures were his. He saw himself in them. Suddenly he realized he had not thought of his brother Harry and the flaming heat exchanger room for months. I've traded one pain for another, he mused, and did not have the heart to slap her for killing the rooster.

Another thing that amazed him: he had never given her a name.

"Harriet," he said, pointing at her, but she shook her hair in a swirl about her head; she was nameless as the tree was nameless; it had cling peach characteristics but there were non-Earthly shapes to its leaves and the ripening fruits were blue. He didn't press the matter; with the two of them, names were unnecessary. When one called it was for the other.

He learned she behaved in cycles. For several weeks she would be attentive, watching closely while he pushed seeds into the earth, helping when he directed her, although she rarely volunteered. Then she

would begin to stand with her bare foot on his, to put her hand in his pocket, to chatter and push him to attract his attention, to sneak her arms about him and chew gently on his shoulder. Sometimes when he would push her away she would snarl and squawl at him, other times, she would stand with her lip pushed out and her eyes blinking so that he was near tears himself. He listened for the rocket with eager unhappiness.

In the ninth month, without warning, she bit the tip off his ear. The impetus of the pain swung his fist against her mouth. When she stumbled to her feet, she tore off her dress, spitting blood and hatred, and fled into the woods. He watched her go with mixed feelings.

In the afternoon, when he began to gather the peaches, he could feel her burning gaze, but he gave no sign. When mealtime came, he did not call her and she did not come, although he glimpsed her once through the alien trees.

Silently he mashed the peaches in five gallon cans, then welded the tops on. He found useful copper tubes in the junk of the *Ventura* venture. But the world was for waiting. Perhaps the spaceship would come first. It was strange, he reflected, that no other ships had paused. The Sirius System was supposed to be a sure thing.

The girl took her meals with him again, but there was a razor edge between them. She watched silently when he cut open the swollen cans and poured off the top liquid. Idly she rubbed dirt in her hair while he set the distiller perking. She whined when he wouldn't give her any.

Soon the freeze box room shimmered with colored lights, New Chicago, with copters honking and girls hurrying along the mobowalk in striped woolen slacks, very tight, and high plastic hats, the latest style. They were smiling and the world was flowing by, but the nameless girl sat quietly, blocking out the Radfriend Building and three bars, much too large, right smack in the middle of it.

"Get out of the panorama," he yelled, and she stared at him, large-eyed.

"No, come sit with daddy," he smirked, but she made no move.

When he lunged at her, she fled silently, and he bumped his head on the wall; the blow did not sober him but turned his thoughts so that he concentrated very hard on being steady as he swung the axe against the still and the unopened cans until the room flowed like a dipsomaniac's dream. Then he tramped solidly into the afternoon, with difficulty found the nameless tree and swung the axe with a great shout and echoed with a surprised laugh as the axe deflected with a solid "chunk" against his shin bone.

She shook him and squawled at him, while he reflected it was unfortunate he had never taught her to make a tourniquet. It was really quite amusing.

WHEN the blow began to reverberate up his leg, he troubled to examine his shin and saw the blood was not rhythmically jetting over the leaves. It was oozing to a stop. The axe had solved nothing. So he crawled wearily to the shack.

A clattering woke him. She had lit the wood in the stove, which he had warned her never to do, and was stirring whole, jaggedly peeled potatoes in the frypan. This surprised him, for he had never tried to teach her to cook. It seemed far too complicated for an animal incapable of consistently picking ripe tomatoes from among the green or of hoeing a bean row for more than a few minutes without losing interest and running over to hug him.

"In water," he offered, "cook them in water."

He was awakened by a burning hot potatoe trying to get in his mouth. He pulled it apart with his hands, forced himself to down it with a smile although it was like a rock in the center and he was woozy to begin with. Raising his head, he saw she had wrapped his foot in a sheet.

He grinned as he felt her hand on his cheek. "Next you'll be lecturing me on Pasteur."

She chirped happily.

Later when he heard her smiling, he twisted his head and realized she was trying to thread a needle; of course she had watched him sew. He did not offer to help since his hands were trembling like an old man's, and finally she gave it up and began boiling peas without shelling them.

"And I always suspected you were an

idiot," he laughed. He suspected, no, he had to admit to himself, that he was nearer the idiot. Apparently you do not train a girl the same way you train an animal; that should be obvious, yet he had given her no more responsibility and less incentive than he would have given a dog. "From now on, strategy will be my middle name."

He stretched and grinned as though something wonderful had been accomplished.

But with morning, rocket deceleration thundered overhead.

He sent her running into the hills until he could see who the rocket contained. It was not the *Doric,* and he was relieved, for suddenly they seemed a villainous, lecherous bunch. He could never have sent her to Earth with them.

Slipping his automatic into his waistband, he hobbled, with his double shadows lurching before him, toward the lowering cloud of dust that obscured the rocket at the watering place.

When the people flowed out, he saw it was the Mormons and was not pleased, although it would be safe enough to turn the girl over to their women, he supposed. If they intended to stay, they could try the other side of the planet, he'd tell them that. This land was staked.

When they reached him, the one who was a doctor pounced on his ankle the way the nameless girl would pounce on a mouse.

When he enquired for the *Doric,* they shook their heads. Their farming supplies had never arrived, but it made no difference now. They were being forced out of the system, which was not the first time they had been pushed around, their bearded leader said.

"You are lucky we paused here to fill the water tanks for the long trip in. We are the last ship. Unless they have been lying to us about the New System, I doubt if ships will bother with these planets for generations. You see, they found heavy metals there and the Government has decreed all colonization must be in that system to support development of mining colonies. They would not have forced us from Smith in a military sense, but we are not yet prepared for isolation; we must trade for many things. Six light years is a long way to be cut off. How lucky you are. You would have been the last man in this solar system. I shiver at the thought."

"Oh?" said Paul calmly enough. "I have vegetables in the ground, your people are welcome to them."

They spread over the field, pulling carrots and potatoes and chewing them raw, for they had been a month now on concentrates.

"We will repay you," the leader assured.

Paul shrugged: "Just so you leave enough for seed."

The doctor chuckled at this. "Come on man. Put your arm about my shoulder, we will take you home."

Paul stood back with his thumb hooked in his belt.

"I wonder if you could pay me for the vegetables now, in books."

"Certainly, we have a first class library. Come aboard."

"You misunderstand, I want to read them here. Not trash; medical books, teachers' training, how-to-do-it manuals."

"You have been alone too long. You need not be afraid of our ways. We do not try to convert spacemen in any case." The doctor took a forward step but stopped, off balance, when Paul's hand slapped the automatic.

"My wife—," Paul had a perplexed, embarrassed look.

The old man was right about him never getting rich. "We have decided to stay here. This is our home."

He saw the doctor raise an eyebrow: no doubt he had run across spacemen who dreamed that convincingly of women many times before. It was difficult when they awoke. Paul had seen a guy in a cage once that had had that happen to him. Very disconcerting, unbearable in fact, when you woke up after a year or two of love and affection and couldn't find her again.

The leader and the doctor made a triangle of glances between each other and the gun, but Paul forestalled any ideas with a backward step, coupled with a deft extraction of what men do not like to look in the muzzle of.

The leader opened his hands. "Get him some books." He smiled rather gently at Paul. "Will you have children?"

"A lot of them, I hope." He wondered if he should take the man to see her tracks, but

it was a windy day. They might not find any and the men might take him off guard. He had no intention of calling her down; he was afraid to, somehow.

The doctor set down a double armload of books. On top, with a crooked smile he laid a thick treatise: WELTY'S CARE OF THE EXPECTANT MOTHER-AND CHILD CARE—ONE VOLUME EDITION.

But he began telling Paul about Earth, the great railyachts and gay cities, the chic girls and cool drinks, plumbing, radiant heat, libraries, dancing, Feelies, Tellies, everyone lived well since the thirty-hour work week.

"Then what are you people pioneering around for?" retorted Paul.

When that last manmade sun was lost in the sky and the loud sound was the blowing of the leaves, Paul limped back up the hill, whistling. But she did not come. And he did not find her or her tracks.

The leaves fluttered with amazement, flew up in familiar patterns that frightfully burst. The hill surged red as the sun found the horizon. Down through the alien treetops, across the leaf-shrouded peaches, its bent rays javelinned the mouse on the trunk of the tree. Chittering, it vanished.

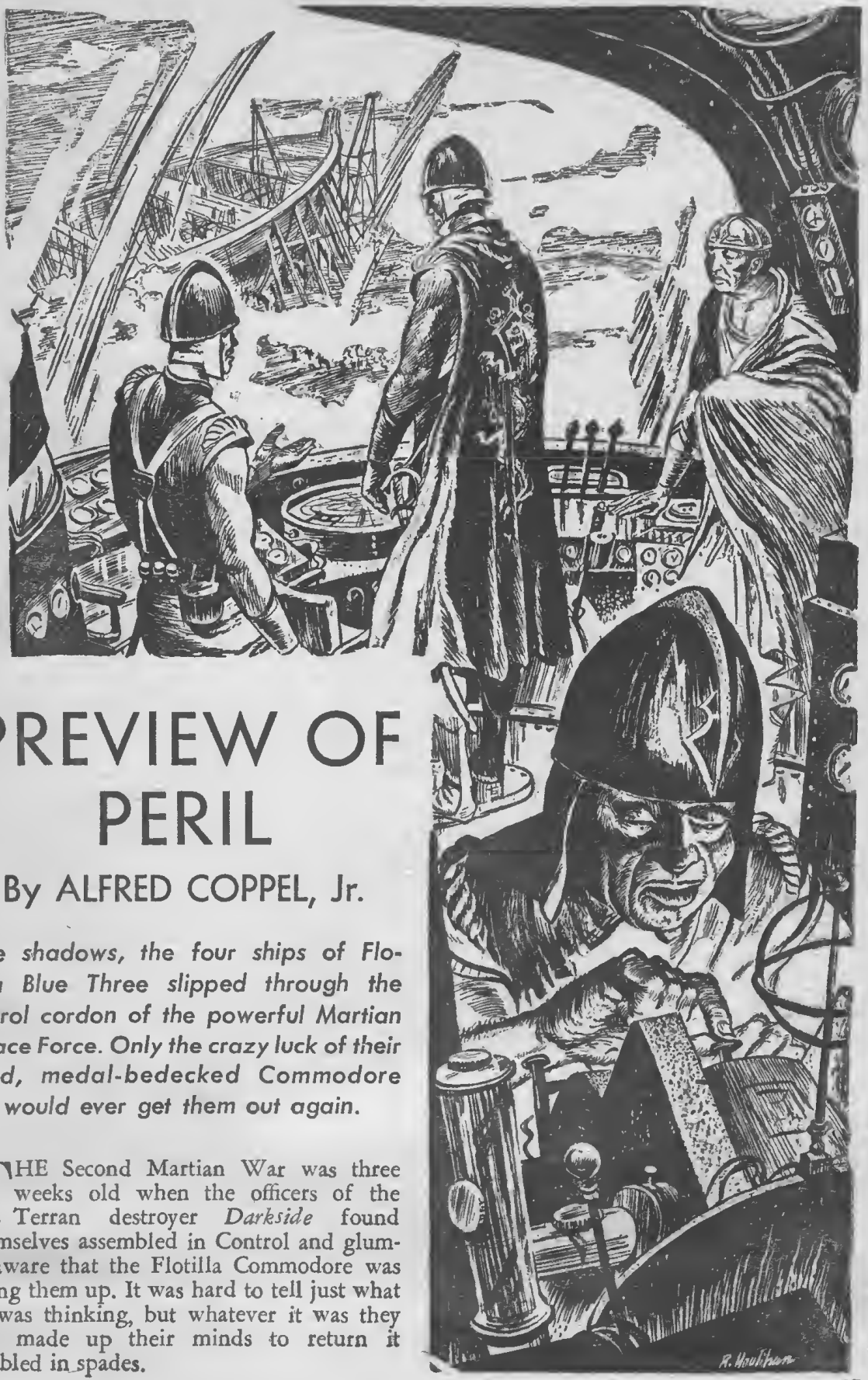
Paul cried out and ran. Down the hill toward the shed, the leaves were rattling together.

He didn't see her till she giggled.

For a long moment he stared, breathing, as she struggled guiltily into her dress. She was watching him so intently she could not seem to find her hand into the armhole. A leaf flitted between them.

Paul smiled; her elbow was sticking out of the armhole.

"Leave it off," he breathed. "That sack isn't necessary any more." He held out his hand. "We'll go look at our peach tree."



PREVIEW OF PERIL

By ALFRED COPPEL, Jr.

Like shadows, the four ships of Flotilla Blue Three slipped through the patrol cordon of the powerful Martian Space Force. Only the crazy luck of their mad, medal-bedecked Commodore would ever get them out again.

THE Second Martian War was three weeks old when the officers of the Terran destroyer *Darkside* found themselves assembled in Control and glumly aware that the Flotilla Commodore was sizing them up. It was hard to tell just what he was thinking, but whatever it was they had made up their minds to return it doubled in spades.

Having a Flotilla Commodore on board was actually a hardship, particularly if as in the case of the *Darkside*—the ship elected was unsuitable for a flagship. The Commodore needed cabin space for himself and for his staff, and that meant that five of the *Darkside's* nine officers would have to double up on what space was left. On board a destroyer that meant a good deal. But more important yet was the moral effect on the ship's company.

With a flag officer on board the easy life of an informal vessel would vanish and something of the formality of a big ship would take its place. The officers and crew would feel themselves under the scrutiny of higher authority no matter how hard the Commodore tried not to interfere with the working of the ship. And it naturally followed that the ship's commander would lose some of the joy in his independent command. Thus a happy ship would become a tight one . . . QED. It was a situation as old as ships and men.

So there was little joy to be seen in the faces of Commander Scott and his officers when Commodore Hartnett stepped through the valve followed by his staff. Nor was their anything about Hartnett's appearance to suggest that they had been anything but right about the manner in which Flotilla Blue Three would be handled throughout the coming patrol. The Commodore was a model of military correctness, a martinet moulded in two Martian Wars and twenty years in space to a steely hardness that was disconcerting.

They saw a lean, leathery man in his late forties, dressed in immaculate Greys that sported an apalling amount of silver braid. Four stripes were rare aboard destroyers. Eyes that matched the hard grey of the uniform glittered in a spaceburned face, shaded by heavy black brows. Young Ensign Blake's heart sank as he took in the set of the shoulders and the smooth fit of the blouse. He made a mental note of the fact that from now on there would be no more standing watches in sweatshirt and sneakers. He also reflected sadly on the many pleasure jaunts that Scott was wont to let him make in the *Darkside's* skeeter-boat, and bade a mental farewell to those happy moments. The set of the Commodore's long jaw instilled more respect for Space Force Regs in the young reservist than all the ten orientation lectures he had received at Hamilton Spaceport. Plainly there was a new era beginning for the TRS *Darkside!*

There wasn't a man on board who hadn't heard of Hartnett, of course. A gambler in combat, he had always managed to come out ahead of the game. His record was the record of practically every major achievement of the Force. Most of it could be read from the four rows of ribbons under his Command Pilot's sunburst.

There was the pale blue of the Terran Honor Medal that he'd won by ramming a Martian dreadnaught of the Diemos class with his criplled corvette off Io in the first Cat war. There was the red bar of the DSM received for leading the first deep-space expedition to reach Ariel and Oberon in the Uranian system . . . that, before Blake had been born. And the rainbow colored ribbon of the old UN patrol, the First Martian Victory Medal, the Venerian Exploratory Medal, the Spatial Cross; four rows of them ending up with the General Service and Martian Occupation Ribbon.

To say that it impressed the *Darkside's* green personnel would be an understatement. The decorations showed Hartnett to be the gambler . . . the lucky gambler . . . that he was said to be.

All the way out to Luna Base from Hamilton Spaceport, the crew of the flagship had been muttering about the "damned brasshat" who was going to disrupt the pleasant life of their beloved ship with his unwanted, high-ranking, stinking, presence, but the iron-hard reality of the man and the aura of confidence that emanated from him as he stood on the steel deck of the Control, spiked their guns too quickly. From the moments Hartnett steeped aboard, reflected Commander Scott bitterly, the ship tightened up. From here on in it was Hartnett's ship and there wasn't a damn thing anyone could do about it.

INTRODUCTIONS were short and to the point. Most of the ship's officers had met Hartnett's staff at the Base Officer's Club after the Captain's Council, where the commanders of the four ships that made up Flotilla Blue Three had met their Commo-

dore for the first time. Scott sighed as he thought of the evident relief on Lieutenant Morrow's face when he had found that the flagship was to be the *Darkside* and not his own ship, the *Lysander*.

"That Hartnett will take over your ship, Scott," Morrow had told him. "He can't help it. From the moment he steps aboard, it'll be his baby." And Hartnett was a gambler. . . .

Scott presented his officers to the Commodore almost jealously, starting with the Executive, Lieutenant Commander Chavez and Lieutenant Horowitz, the Tactical Physicist; and ending up with Ensign Blake, the Junior Gunnery Officer, who was startled from his nervous fidgeting by the sound of his name.

"A reservist," was Hartnett's only comment, and though it was said in a friendly tone, Blake flushed furiously and wondered if it stuck like straw out of his ears.

"Mr. Blake is the Charles Blake who won the New York to Ley City amateur skeeter-boat race last year, Sir," explained Scott.

The Commodore nodded vaguely, his eyes wandering over the burnished chrome and steel of the Control panels. "Good sport, small ship racing, Mr. Blake," he commented.

Blake's cherubic face burst into smiles. "The best sir!"

Hartnett's men were presented to the ship's commander more as a formality than anything else, as he had met them before. Thorne, a full Commander, was Flotilla Astrogator, Wilson and Orsov, Lieutenants, were Flotilla Gunnery Officers, James, a jaygee, was Flotilla Signals Officer, and Ensign Ward, a thin boy about Blake's age, was the Commodore's Aide. He sported his single silver augilette proudly.

They didn't seem a bad lot, reflected Scott grudgingly. Maybe they wouldn't get in the way too much.

"We can lift ship as soon as convenient, Mr. Scott," said Hartnett, issuing his first order.

"Aye, sir."

Hartnett turned to his staff. "Get yourselves below and sort yourselves out. Try not to take up too much room." As they vanished down the ramp, he turned to take a seat at the visiplates.

Scott was taking a time check from the Tower Control, and the signalmen were relaying the lift-ship order to the three other ships of Blue Three. Outside on the airless field, the amber warning lights were spinning on the Tower mast, warning the spacesuited maintenance crews away from the blast pits.

Chavez was snapping orders into the intercom and the *Darkside* was awaking to activity smoothly. Five shielded decks below Control, Chief Jetman Collins and the blackgang were busily removing the seals from the cadmium dampers in the blast chambers. The "three-minutes-to-lift-ship" alarm blared and the lights dimmed, leaving Control lighted only by the reflected glow of the panel lights. On the visiplate screen, the slender shapes of the *Lysander*, the *Argus* and the fat, ungainly silhouette of the ironically named *Artemis* showed clearly in the earthlight.

The *Artemis*, thought Hartnett, was the only weak link in his command. The other three ships were modern, but the *Artemis* was an ancient alcohol burner, converted to atomics and pressed into service by the exigencies of an undeclared and treacherous war.

At best, she could stand no more than 5 Terran Gs and the rest of the Flotilla would be forced to keep to her reduced speed throughout the cruise. Her armament was lighter and her armor thinner than it should be. In fact, she was strictly Cat meat if she should ever be forced to stand and fight. And if they intercepted any Cats, that is exactly what she would have to do, since she was the only ship of Blue Three that could not outrun any comparable Martian ship.

Scott was giving his orders now, eyes fastened on the master chronometer. Hartnett was pleased to see that he did so without a sidelong look at his superior. He knew his business and did it. Good. Then Hartnett could stick to handling Blue Three and worrying about the *Artemis* without thought of how the ship under him was being managed.

He slipped into his G-Suit and plugged the lines into an outlet on the side of his chair. The second hand swept up the face of the dial, and Scott hit the firing studs.

Far below, Jetman Collins removed the dampers from the main blast chambers.

THE takeoff was strictly routine for the Luna Base personnel. The four ships of the Flotilla rose from the pits on their long tails of radioactive flame, setting the outside Geiger counters to clucking wildly and outlining in vivid relief the three dreadnaughts that lay in their careening berths and the dozen or so smaller ships on the line. Under 3 Terran Gs of acceleration, Flotilla Blue Three was soon lost in the ebony sky. For just an instant there was the vaguest suggestion of four racing shadows on the blue-green disk of the gibbous Terra that hung low in the heavens, and then nothing. The airless silence of Luna Base continued unbroken.

In the sheathed Control Tower, the Operations Officer made ready to go off watch. He was thinking of a few drinks and a girl and maybe a thick steak down in Ley City. Wonderful place, Ley City . . . even in wartime.

The door burst open, but it was not his relief. It was a breathless yeoman of signals. He held a sheaf of papers in his hand.

"Has Blue Three lifted, sir? Cryptographing sent me with this."

"Damn! They're well out by this time Reilly." He indicated the radar screen that showed four rapidly moving pips already heading into deep space.

The yeoman handed him the papers without a word.

"What kept you?" The officer demanded angrily.

Reilly looked at his superior reproachfully. "I made it from Crypto in forty seconds flat, sir. Couldn't come any faster!"

"Dammit! Now we'll have to put this on tight beam and scramble it. Intelligence suspects the Cats have cracked our cipher!"

He sat down at the scrambler and began to type.

"COMMODORE CLARE HARTNETT: ABOARD TRS DARKSIDE FLOTILLA BLUE THREE. PRIORITY MISSION. REPEAT. PRIORITY MISSION. SPATIAL INTELLIGENCE REPORTS LARGE QUANTITY ISOTOPE X-R REFERENCE 6589-3 CODE BOOK IN DANGER OF CAPTURE AT METALLURGICAL STATION 9 CHART REFERENCE A-5. PREVENT AT ALL COSTS. LARGE CONCENTRATION MARTIAN PHOBOS CLASS CRUISERS AND POSSIBLE SUPERDREADNAUGHT ARMED WITH CYCLOTRONICS IN VICINITY SEARCHING FOR STATION 9. REPEAT. X-R MUST NOT FALL INTO MARTIAN HANDS. DESTROY IF NECESSARY. FOR YOUR INFORMATION AND GUIDANCE INTELLIGENCE SUSPECTS CIPHER TWO HAS BEEN CRACKED BY MARTIAN CRYPTO. LUCK. DO NOT ACKNOWLEDGE. SIGNED: TORAN LONG, CAPTAIN, SENIOR CONTROL, LUNA BASE. END MESSAGE."

Rising, he detached the roll of perforated tape from the scrambler and fed it into the tight beam transmitter. When the roll was consumed, Long dropped sullenly into a chair. His relief arrived, but all desire to partake of the joys of Ley City was gone. Like most of the old timers he admired Hartnett immensely, and he could not rid himself of the feeling that he was in some way responsible for sending the fabulous spaceman into sure destruction.

Against the ten known cruisers and the suspected superdreadnaught that were searching that quadrant for the illusive Station 9, the strength of Flotilla Blue Three was sadly inadequate.

If the message had arrived earlier, a dreadnaught or at least a couple of cruisers could have been despatched with Hartnett's force. But the impossibility of a rendevouz in space made it strictly the Commodore's baby now. Besides, Terra had no ships to spare. Hartnett would have to rescue the three technicians at the Station and destroy the Isotope X-R with no help.

The Cats didn't know what X-R was, but they wanted to find out awfully badly if their concentration of strength in the Uranus quadrant was any indication. And it wouldn't be very long before they found that the mysterious Station 9 was on Oberon, either. With more than eleven ships prowling around, they wouldn't miss such an obvious bet for very much longer. All Hartnett had to do now was sneak through their

screen, land a ship on Oberon, take the technicians off, destroy the X-R, and get away again without being seen because the *Artemis* couldn't fight! Long groaned. That's all!

Oh, why, he wondered, wouldn't Terrans learn? An ancient leader of Terra's nationalist era had said it perfectly for them. Speak softly, he had said, but carry a big stick! Why wouldn't they listen?

He shook his head and left the Control Tower wearily.

"What's eating him?" asked the relief.

"He's just sent Blue Three into the Uranus quadrant," replied Reilly.

The relief gave a low whistle and turned to look out over the earthlit moonscape. "Too bad."

HARTNETT caught the Commander's eye as he worked at the control board.

"Sorry to crowd you like this, Mr. Scott," he said.

"It's nothing at all, sir. It's a pleasure to have you aboard." Even as he said it, Scott realized how stupid it must sound. Of course it crowded him to have Hartnett aboard and it annoyed him being the second ranking officer on his own ship.

Commodore Hartnett smiled at the Commander's words. There was hardly anything else he could say, poor devil. Rank has its privileges, he thought. But he said: "Glad you feel that way," and fell silent watching Scott and the Quartermaster guide the ship through the first stages of acceleration.

Scott felt he should say something more, but he wasn't at all sure just what. Finally he said. "We've only an hour or so more of acceleration, sir. If there's anything you want tied down in your cabin, you'd best notify Mr. Ward. The *Darkside* has no gravitators."

"The cabin will be in order, Mr. Scott," replied Hartnett casually, "My staff and I are all destroyer men."

Scott cursed himself for an idiot and mumbled an apology, but the Commodore had let the incident pass with a half hidden smile and was inspecting the orbital calculators at the far wing of the Control panel.

The voice of Lieutenant Morse, Astrogation Officer, saved Scott any further embarrassment. The communicator buzzed and Scott closed the switch.

"Control here!" he snapped, a bit too crisply.

"Astrogation. We'll be at the boundary of our inner patrol zone at 2335 Sidereal, sir."

Scott looked over at Hartnett. "Any orders, sir?"

The Commodore shook his head. "Just have the other ships maintain visual contact. Particularly the *Artemis*. The *Lysander* can take the rear position. Have me called in my cabin if anything comes up before then. See you in the wardroom at dinner. Carry on, Mr. Scott."

He left Scott feeling sorry for his friend, Tom Drew, who commanded Blue Three's lame duck, the beloved *Artemis*.

Striding down the ramp, the Commodore came to the main gun deck and headed aft, past the banks of five inchers and torpedo tubes that lined the inner shell. The gun crews stood respectfully as he walked past them and returned young Blake's sharp salute. Hartnett restrained a smile and continued down to the cabin deck.

Ensign Ward was unpacking his gear as he came through the valve, and listening to a commercial broadcast on short wave that crackled and faded with the vagaries of Terra's faraway heavyside layer. The reports, pieced together, gave a fairly comprehensive picture of the fighting that was going on in the Uranian quadrant.

"I don't like the way things are going, sir," said Ward.

Hartnett didn't either, but he could see no point in saying so. Besides, the Flotilla's patrol area was on the other side of the sun from Uranus, and the news there was bad enough to give him food for thought.

"I won't need you for a bit, Ward. Take off and get yourself settled," he suggested.

The aide saluted and left. Hartnett stripped off his blouse and shirt and settled himself comfortably on the acceleration bunk. He switched on the bank of solar lamps and let the warm rays sooth and relax his tired muscles. The tension of many harrowing days in the Pentagon began to leave him, and he felt a great pity for the desk-bound VIP who could not know the joy of

a ship under them in deep space. Thank God he got past the last physical. They were getting tougher every patrol!

The radio was still on and as the news reports came in, his restless mind turned to consider the unfortunate tactical situation in which the Terran Space Force now found itself.

It was the old democratic failing. God Bless it! As old as Terra's history. Ship for ship and man for man the Terran Forces were better than the Martian. Terrans shot faster and straighter. Terran ships flew farther and faster. And Terra, for all its failings, was a free world fighting for a free space. But the Cats had more ships and a hell of a lot less reluctance about using them to enslave everybody in sight.

THE first Martian war had ended the squabbling confederation of sovereign states that had been the UN. And the Martian war had brought about in five short years the advancement of space-flight that might otherwise have taken decades. It was ironic that the peace-loving peoples of the Universe always seemed to produce better under the harsh goad of war. The nastier the war the more magnificent the achievements. Hartnett wondered if that were not a very significant commentary on the true nature of the human organism.

But in the first Cat war the Solar System had been faced with the unfortunate situation of two races developing interplanetary flight within a decade of each other . . . and both starting out to proselytize their own peculiar institutions among the outposts of the System. A clash was inevitable . . . and Terra won the narrow margin of victory by a more comprehensive understanding of material science. While the war had begun with chemical fueled ships and bombs, it had ended up with atomic powered ships and proton cannon.

The primitive ships of the war's beginning were still vivid memories to Hartnett. He had spent many months in them, suffering the effects of free-fall for weeks while they coasted in half-computed orbits around the sun. The people of Terra had long had atomics, but it was not until the third year of war that a method had been found to utilize the power of the atom for a space drive. In those days a ship did not dare even a perihelion passage, for fear the terrible heat of the sun would detonate their precious reserves of fuel. Things were different now.

Ward reentered the room abruptly. "Message from Luna Control, sir," he said, passing over the note. "Came on tight beam, coded, and scrambled," he added unnecessarily.

The Commodore read it over slowly and pursed his lips. He swung his legs over the side of the bunk and reached for the intercom. "Control."

"Control here," came the reply.

"Stand by for a change of course. Be with you in a moment."

There was a moment of surprised silence, and then: "Aye, sir."

Hartnett turned to his aide. "Reach me that space-bag, will you Ward? That's the one. Fish out Code Book 6589 and the A chart. That's the deal."

HARTNETT's staff and all of the *Darkside's* officers not actually on watch assembled in the wardroom on the Commodore's orders. The Flotilla had already come about and was heading sunward, its steady acceleration of 3 Gs aided by gravity. Already, Greys had been packed away in deference to the rising temperature, and all hands were clad in fiberglass shorts and jumpers.

The assembled officers rose when the Commodore entered the room and he waved them back to their seats, taking a chair at the head of the mess table.

"Mr. Scott," he began without preamble, "What do you know about the new Cat superdreadnaughts?"

"Very little, sir. I have heard that they are the biggest thing in space . . . although I don't believe they have more than one in service right now. The other two of that class were photographed by a photo-recon skeeter out of the *Gorgon* a week before we lifted ship. I saw the prints."

"What about armament?" asked the Flotilla Gunnery Officer, Wilson.

Scott shrugged. "We know very little about that. Mr. Horowitz could tell you more. I understand they mount some kind of new cyclotronic rifles."

"That's correct, sir," replied Horowitz. "I don't know exactly how the things work, but I could guess that they detonate the heavy metals used for fuel in atomic powered vessels."

"Range?" asked Lieutenant Orsov laconically.

"No information . . . but I would be willing to guess that it is not more than fifty miles no matter how tight their beam. There would be far too great a voltage loss."

"Mr. Blake," said Hartnett, "How good are you on the skeeter-boat?"

Blake looked perplexed, but he answered with some pride that he was considered quite passable.

"I'll bear that out, sir," said Scott drily. "Mr. Blake is something of a hotshot pilot."

"Good enough," returned Hartnett. "We'll see when we near Station 9." He looked over at Blake. "Do you think you can land a skeeter there and take off three passengers without arousing the Cats?"

"A skeeter is only meant for three people, sir, and four would be quite an overload," protested Blake.

"It will have to be done. If we try to land a ship there, every Cat in the quadrant will be on our necks. It's either the skeeter, or . . ." he shrugged expressively.

"If we strip the boat down and remove all unnecessary mass it should do," suggested Orsov. "What do you think, Blake?"

Blake gulped. To strip the skeeter would mean removing all armor and guns. "I . . . uh. . . ." He squared his shoulders and grinned sheepishly. "It would," he declared finally.

"Good," said the Commodore.

"Just where is this Station 9, sir?" asked Morse.

Hartnett ignored the question, but by way of answer, he turned to his Flotilla Astrogator, Thorne and asked: "Do you remember the analysis of Oberon's surface, Thorne?"

"Vaguely. All four of the Uranian satellites are composed mainly of pitchblende and similar ores. Heavy metals. Very dense. I happen to remember because it's one of the coincidences of astronomy that the planet itself was given the name Uranus before the discovery that the whole of its system was lousy with uranium ores."

"What else can you tell us about it?"

"Well, Oberon is small . . . about 800 miles in diameter. Ariel and Titania are about 1,000 and 600 respectively, and Umbriel is the baby at about 400 miles. Much of Terra's uranium was brought in from Titania back in the days of U-235 bombs and so forth. They are abandoned now."

"Gentlemen," said Hartnett, facing the others seriously. "There are ten Martian cruisers and a superdreadnaught in the vicinity of Oberon and Ariel . . . you may have guessed by this time that our mysterious Station 9 is on Oberon. My orders are to rescue the three technicians and destroy their samples of Isotope X-R, which is, I understand, a very unstable Isotope of plutonium.

"If we could . . . in some way . . . destroy the bulk of the Cat strength in the Uranus system, it would be a great step forward toward the successful conclusion of this war that is still young enough to have killed relatively few people."

Scott looked around at his officers and read plain astonishment on their faces. To talk of destroying such a Martian fleet with four tiny ships was madness!

"The rescue of the Station personnel will be handled by Mr. Blake and the skeeter-boat. And . . . if the plan I have works out properly, the destruction of the enemy fleet will be handled by . . . one ship alone." He looked around the table with the vaguest suggestion of a grin on his leathery face. He nodded his head at Scott. "You're quite right, Mr. Scott, the *Artemis*."

SCOTT paced furiously up and down the steel deck of the dark Control. Chavez sat before the panels, his saturnine face wreathed in demon-like curls of blue smoke from the short, black, Mexican cheroot he smoked so lovingly.

"You should have heard him!" exclaimed Scott, "Standing there and calmly telling us that we are going to destroy the Cat fleet with the *Artemis!* Booby trap 'em, he says! Chav, I tell you he's gone looney!"

Chavez shrugged and smoothed his hairline moustache. "Quien sabe?"

"What the hell do you mean 'Quien sabe!' Are you trying to tell me you're thinking he can do it?"

The Latin smiled, showing animal white

teeth. "I understand he's done a lot of things that people said weren't possible. Personally, I should be very glad if he did what he says so we could all get back to Ley City. Amigo, I have a little friend back on Luna that is." He smiled dreamily and kissed his fingertips.

"I think you're all going crazy. It's just having that man aboard."

"Ah, Ah!" cautioned Chavez, "Remember all those beautiful silver stripes."

"Well, damn the lot of you. I just hope we get the *Darkside* back to Luna Base and your little . . ." He made an angry parody of Chavez's romantic gesture.

"We'll get back, I think, Mr. Scott," said a casual voice from the Valve. The Commodore was standing in the arch, outlined against the ramp light. He stepped into Control and took a seat beside Chavez at the panels.

Scott and Chavez maintained an embarrassed silence. Hartnett looked up to study the now receding solar disk through the tinted visiplate. The Flotilla was now heading once again for deep space.

It was a few moments before Hartnett spoke. When he did, it was a command directed at Scott.

"Mr. Scott, the Flotilla will land for certain necessary readjustments on Hyperion. See that the other vessels are properly notified." Then he rose and left the Control.

Scott dropped unhappily into a chair. He looked at Chavez. "Well, Mr. Chavez. How do you think you will enjoy command of the *Darkside?*"

Chavez laid a friendly hand on his commander's sleeve. "I don't think he'd take your ship from you just because . . ."

"Skip it, Chav!" snapped Scott and he left the Control in peevish silence.

SIXTY hours later Blue Three lay grounded in a jagged little valley on airless Hyperion. Spacesuited figures swarmed about the clustered ships transferring personnel from the *Artemis* to the other ships, and rigging special television, remote control, and other apparatus in the *Artemis*.

Hartnett stood beneath the *Darkside's* ventral valve on the metallic soil of the little moon with Chavez and Orsov watching the progress of the work. Lieutenant Morrow of the *Lysander* and Lieutenant Griggs of the *Argus* joined them and stood in silence while the last of the *Artemis'* personnel was transferred into the *Darkside*. Tom Drew, the commander of the *Artemis* stood sadly apart watching the spacemen make a ghost ship of his command.

On the eastern horizon, Saturn was rising into a black sky studded with points of fiery brilliance. Quickly the ringed planet climbed into the sky and flooded the tortured landscape of Hyperion with light. The men at the *Darkside's* valve stood watching the show of celestial grandeur in awe. Orsov, for all his deep space experience, could not help but feel a twinge of vertigo as he looked up into the haloed face of the heavenly giant that filled a quarter of the inverted bowl of ebony that the heavens had become.

Everyone was relieved to lift ship, however, for the thought of being caught grounded by any roving Martian spaceship was not pleasant to contemplate. Atomic bombs had long been obsolete, but one such would certainly suffice to exterminate four grounded spacecraft. Then too, they were all glad to get away from the glaring spectre that so eerily filled too much of the sky . . . the ringed Saturn had a hypnotic effect that left a man shaken.

In the Control of the *Darkside* Chavez whispered to Scott: "We were thinking that you were going to lose the *Darky* . . . and it turns out that poor old Drew is the one who lost his command."

"He should be glad to get rid of it."

"But what," asked Chavez, "is the old man going to do with her?"

Scott shrugged and spoke succinctly. "Bait." His spirits had risen considerably when Hartnett had left him in command of the *Darkside*, contrary to his expectations. He reflected somewhat ruefully that it did a man good to have a scare thrown into him from time to time. Even now, rapidly approaching a quadrant heavy with Cat warships, he could feel contented in merely feeling his beloved tin can responding under his hands on the control panels.

A thousand yards behind and astern, the unmanned *Artemis* followed the *Darkside* like a dog on a leash, its myriad functions

controlled by an invisible chain of subetheric impulses from jerry-rigged remote controls on the *Darkside's* gun deck.

In the faint light of the faraway sun, where the irrepressible Blake had sloshed paint on her flank, gleamed the legend: BOOBY TRAP.

Like shadows, the four ships of Flotilla Blue Three slipped through the patrol cordons of the Martian Space Force. In the infinite vastnesses of the interplanetary deeps they were unnoticed. Blast tubes silent, guided only by the ever increasing gravitational attraction of mammoth Uranus, and the reaction of whining gyroscopes.

Beneath them, its greenish disk ever increasing, lay Uranus . . . cold, harsh, forbidding. The thick atmosphere of methane and ammonia lay in great turbulent belts, whipped to maniacal fury by the eternal storms that swept the unguessable surface of the ghastly planet.

BLAKE shivered slightly as the skeeter-valve of the *Darkside* closed soundlessly behind him and the blackness of the void closed in about the tiny boat. For just an instant, the familiar shape of the destroyer loomed comfortingly in the faint light of the dwarfed sun, and then it was gone, and he was falling away towards the mystery shrouded world that lay beneath him. The very size of the disk was frightening. A huge swirling mass 30,000 miles across seemed to be drawing him inexorably into its gassy body.

With an effort he settled himself down in the control chair and patted the tattered pin-up picture on the panel before him. It was a bit of Terra far from home, and the simple act gave him courage. This was certainly different from the Terra-Luna flights he had so often made alone . . . this was different. He grinned to himself and spoke aloud the phrase made famous by ten thousand generations of actors and hacks. This, he declaimed, is *it!*

Quickly now, he set up the constants for Oberon and pressed the firing stud. There was a sickening feeling in the pit of his stomach as the skeeter came alive and the vast disk of Uranus vanished from the forward vision ports. Speed was essential now. His trail would not mark the place of the Flotilla, but it surely would arouse the sharp eyes of the Cats who must be nearby. He pressed the second stud and the skeeter leaped ahead. The accelerometer stood at 7 Terran Gs. By long practice he could stand 11 . . . and the skeeter . . . stripped and souped up . . . could produce 20. Far too many.

He set the seat to prone position. Maybe he could squeeze an extra one out of it now. 12 G! He gave the skeeter more power and the stars seemed to go into a crazy dance as his vision started to fail. Enough.

Thirty minutes of terrific speed and still no sign of the Cats. The tiny, dark disc of Oberon grew with alarming rapidity in the port. He began to decelerate so fast that he nearly blacked out again. Damn! Below him the tiny moon lay barren and bizarre in the greenish glow of its huge primary.

The mushroom shaped huts of the metallurgical station were directly below him and he swung the skeeter into a wild approach that would have given his rocket instructor heart failure, but the boat held together and settled to the surface of the tiny spaceport with a crunch. Without waiting even for the surrounding soil to cool, Blake was out of the ship and clumping clumsily toward the distant huts. The terrific density of Oberon made the gravity almost normal. Three suited figures appeared from the valves and began to run grotesquely toward him. He waved them back and began shouting instructions at them on the photophone. The infrared lamps on the top of the helmets blinked eagerly in answer. Then quickly the four men vanished into the storage hut and set feverishly to work.

Control was lit only by the red battle lamps. Lines were strung along the walls and through the valves, and Scott, Chavez, and the Quartermaster sat strapped at the panels. The ship was in a free falling orbit around Uranus, its sister ships and the ghost ship, *Artemis,* following her lead like huge beads on an invisible string. The orbit could not be broken until Blake returned with the Station technicians. *All hands* sat in nervous silence at GQ while the Flotilla hung dead in space.

Commodore Hartnett came through the valve from the gun deck. There was a flimsy

in his hand and he pulled himself along the guide-line with some difficulty.

"Mr. Scott," he rapped out. The waiting was taking its toll of his nerves as well as the other's. "Mr. Scott. You will break radio silence and transmit this message immediately. Unscrambled and in Code Two."

The men at the panels stiffened in surprise. So far they had managed to avoid arousing the prowling Cats . . . but now this!

"Sir," protested Scott, "You surely can't mean to break radio silence with young Blake down there!"

It was hard for a man to look dignified floating in midair . . . but somehow Hartnett managed it. "It's an order, Mr. Scott."

Scott flushed angrily. A gambler! Damn you, he thought! But he bit his lip and reached for the message. "Yes, sir."

Hartnett remained behind him as he rang for communications.

"Communications here!"

"Stand by to transmit."

"Spread beam," ordered Hartnett.

Scott cursed silently. "Spread beam."

"Aye, aye, Sir. . . ." The voice of the radioman sounded strangled.

Scott read from the flimsy in a flat voice, a note of astonishment creeping in as he finished the message.

"TORAN LONG, SENIOR CONTROL, LUNA BASE. AM STANDING BY OFF OBERON READY TO LOAD ISOTOPE X-R ON BOARD DESTROYER "ARTEMIS" HAVE NOT MET THE ENEMY AND HAVE SUFFERED NO CASUALTIES. ONE AUXILIARY TUBE ON THE "ORION" HAS BLOWN BUT THE "JOVE" AND "MINERVA" ARE STANDING BY TO EFFECT EMERGENCY REPAIRS. HAVE DOCK SPACE AVAILABLE FOR REPAIR OF "ORION" L PLUS 21 2235 SIDEREAL. SIGNED C. HARTNETT COMMODORE RED SIX. END MESSAGE."

Scott wondered wildly if Hartnett had not suddenly lost his mind. Red Six was the Code name for the Task Force that included five Terran dreadnaughts, and the part about the blown tube and the repairs added up to just so much lunacy. The Cats had the cipher . . . there wasn't much doubt of that, and had Hartnett invited every Martian captain in the quadrant to come blasting down on them with all tubes blowing, he couldn't have phrased it better!

Leaving the stunned Scott to ponder his strange madness, Commodore Hartnett hurried down into the cluttered gun-deck. Drew, at the remote controls of the *Artemis,* was ready for action when he arrived. Time was important now, thought Hartnett.

"Now get that can down there . . . and fast!"

Drew and his men went into action, and the *Artemis* vanished from the string of beads and plunged toward Oberon . . . an empty and forlorn bait for a trap whose jaws were beginning to close as from all over the quadrant, Cat warships converged on Oberon . . . their vaunted superdreadnaught in the lead.

Twenty minutes after *Artemis* left the Flotilla, the radioactive streaks of the first Martian cruisers showed in the sky 15,000 miles away.

BLAKE and the three technicians from Station 9 huddled in the careening skeeter-boat. They were almost on top of the Martian superdreadnaught before they saw it. For just a fleeting instant it seemed to fill all of space, and then it was gone. The Cats on board paid no attention to a tiny boat that they imagined to be the survivor of the battle that must have already begun off Oberon. But Blake paled at the very size and might of the craft. From what he had seen of it it would take much heavier stuff than the *Darkside* carried to dent that monster!

Then they were nearing the *Darkside* and Blake had his hands full threading the skeeter back into the valve that yawned black as he drew near. Once aboard, he slipped through the sighing valves and into the boat deck. A steward came to take charge of the passengers, and Blake hurried up to the gun-deck that had been transformed into the extra-corporeal brain of the doomed *Artemis.*

Hartnett looked up from his work to grunt at him: "Did you do what I told you to do?"

Blake grinned, "Yes, sir. All the stuff is

buried in the storage chambers directly under the pits . . . the ones that are used to store the coolants."

"Good enough." He rang for Control. "Have we been sighted yet?"

"No, sir," came Chavez' voice. "But the Cats are gathering thick and fast."

Blake told Hartnett about the mammoth superdreadnaught, and the older man smiled. "We'll see if we can't give them something for their trouble." He turned back to the communicator. "Chavez, see to it that we maintain a mean distance from Oberon of at least 25,000 miles. And have all the screens in place."

"Aye, Sir."

"*Artemis* is down, Sir," reported Drew.

Hartnett turned to look into the visiplates. The derelict ship had landed nicely on the spaceport near the metallurgical station. He nodded with satisfaction. At least the blast of her tubes hadn't detonated the pile. He looked into a sky plate and saw that she had not landed a minute too soon.

Two Martian cruisers, their black shapes dark against the starry sky, were hanging low over her. Others circled behind them, and higher than all the others, Hartnett could make out the huge shape of the superdreadnaught that Blake had seen. That was the one he wanted!

For perhaps twenty minutes the Martians hung suspiciously over the still landscape of Oberon. Then a cruiser detached itself and began to sink down towards the spaceport on a long, slowly diminishing column of flame.

Hartnett swore. They were going to try and land! That wouldn't do at all. He had to goad them into attacking. He snapped an order to Drew. Only one of the *Artemis'* proton cannon was connected with the remote control apparatus in the *Darkside* but Hartnett hoped it would be enough. It had to be.

Taking the gun control himself, he swung the sight so that it pointed at the lowest cruiser. A flash of energy sizzled from the projector, and spattered on the exposed flank of the Cat cruiser throwing sparks wildly like the glitter of a child's Fourth of July sparkler. The ship shuddered under the impact and glowed white hot along the scarred beam.

Like a speeded up motion picture shot, the Cat ship leaped away from the spaceport, leveling its own guns at the recumbent *Artemis*. The men in the *Darkside* caught a glimpse of the other ships bearing their projectors, and far above, Hartnett was elated to see that the superdreadnaught had extended the muzzles of its massive cyclotronic rifles.

The cruisers fired first, and the screens went blank, so the Terrans never saw the rest of it. But up in the darkened Control Chavez and Scott were witnesses to one of the greatest cataclysms men have ever seen.

The tiny disk of Oberon seemed to light up with a white fire; swelling like a glowing balloon and then shattering with a violence that left them speechless. The very atmosphere of Uranus under the low swinging moonlet boiled and billowed with a frightful incandescence, great prominences or radioactivated methane spouting high into the air as the very internal balance of the great planet teetered.

A shock-wave of corruscating fire shot out from the blazing surface of Oberon, engulfing the Martian warships in a sea of spinning, scintillating destruction. Like a tiny nova, the satellite flared in the black silence of deep space, vaporizing everything within ten thousand miles of it; churning the very vacuum into a hell of hard radiation.

Scott stared at the outside Geiger counters as they chattered their story of charged ions and electrons battering, even at this distance, at sheathing in the destroyer's hull.

Hartnett's shouted order to ". . . get the hell out of here!" was strictly unnecessary. By the time he had issued it, the remaining three ships of Blue Three were piling on Gs in the direction of Terra.

Though no one stayed to look at it, the sight of the remnants of Oberon forming into a thin ring around the grumbling Uranus must have been quite impressive.

TEN hours from Luna Base, Flotilla Blue Three's officers had assembled for a victory dinner in the wardroom. The last course was cleared away, and Chavez passed a quantity of his precious cheroots around.

He settled himself down beside Scott and dragged happily at his smoke.

It was Blake who burst out with the question that was on everyone's mind.

Commodore Hartnett smiled. "It was Horowitz who really doped the thing out, gentlemen. I just put the plan into operation. You see, plutonium can be used as a sort of booster charge in a chain reaction explosion . . . you all know that. You, yourself, Blake, and you men from the station moved the stuff into a spot that would be directly under the poor old *Artemis* when the shooting started.

"You youngsters don't remember much about land warfare, so it was up to me to rig the trap. The bait was *Artemis*. The teaser was the spread-beam radio message about the three dreadnaughts that we aren't . . . Remember that, Mr. Scott?"

Scott blushed furiously and nodded.

"Well," continued Hartnett, "It was something of a gamble, I suppose. But the odds were long and the chances weren't too bad.

"You all know how anxious the Cats are to try something new. Those cyclotronic rifles must have been literally burning a hole in their pockets . . . and the range was short . . . they couldn't resist the temptation to try them. If they had stuck to proton guns they would have melted *Artemis* down and that would have been the end of it . . . they would have had the X-R to do with as they pleased. But they got itchy fingers with the new stuff . . . as I prayed they would. Curiosity, I suppose. The feline instinct. Have you ever seen a cat trying to open a package? Same kind of people.

"The rest was just a repetition of the atom blasts of the first Martian War and the earlier wars on Terra. The only difference was the size of the bomb. The cyclotrons set off the chain reaction in the plutonium . . . the plutonium set off the reaction in the U-235 . . . common enough on a world made practically all of pitchblende and other Uranium compounds. The same thing could happen to . . . say Terra . . . if we ever started a chain reaction in one of the commoner elements such as iron, or carbon. Or even one of the commoner gases. Anyway there are only three satellites in the Uranian System now . . . and eight less Cat cruisers and one less superdreadnaught. I suspect the Cats can hardly afford to lose them, too. Wouldn't surprise me to hear that Mars has been feeling around for an armistice even by the time we get home. The very fact that they have no idea how their fleet was destroyed will tickle them in the right place, I suppose."

Scott spoke in surprised tones. "So they blew themselves up with their own fancy cannon."

Hartnett nodded reflectively. "Um . . . that's about it. Of course we had to set up the proper conditions." He grinned at the younger man. "Or, you might say, the 'Booby Trap'. . . ."

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WHERE SEX MET SPACE

By J. W. GROVES

Free in space at last . . . and with an emergency to meet . . . only the stars alone knew what mad Miss Crane would do next!

"IT'S SHEER sex prejudice, nothing else. You're five centuries out of date."

Admiral Blighton smiled benignly at the speaker. It was, perhaps, a little undignified for the Overall Commander of the Solar Space Fleet to engage in argument at the

dinner table with a mere civilian castaway; but if he felt this he showed nothing of it in his face. "My dear Miss Crane," he said. "I assure you that you are mistaken. Women have complete equality these days. You engage in all the professions, you have seats in the Council of the United Worlds, you command a number of the trading ships that ply between the planets."

"But we aren't admitted into the Space Navy. Not even as ordinary ratings. Owing to your edict."

"Not mine alone." He replied serenely. "Every other Overall Commander who preceded me came to the same decision. It's more or less a tradition."

"A stupid tradition. And one that you could break."

A crumpled, plumpy middle-aged lady three seats to the girl's left spoke in the penetrating whisper of the slightly deaf. "Julia! Do be quiet, please. I think it's most ungrateful of you to start arguing with the Admiral when they've only just rescued us."

"What's that got to do with it, Aunt Jane?" demanded the girl angrily. "It's part of their job to pick up the people in stranded passenger ships."

Captain Thomas Jordan, seated immediately on her right, turned slightly in his chair to get a good look at her. With her character she should have been a Junoesque redhead. Instead she was petite and fluffily blonde, with china blue eyes, softly rounded features, and a pert, uptilted nose.

He sighed. Just his type, physically. And they would be bound to see a lot of each other during the last three days of their voyage home. But. . . . He turned ostentatiously to the red-skinned, lizard-like figure on his right. "Unpleasant weather we're having lately, aren't we?" he remarked loudly.

The Martian, his race notorious for its lack of a sense of humor, merely looked bewildered.

The gesture and the remark were not lost on the Admiral, however. He appealed for support. "Come, Mr. Jordan, tell us what you think about the question."

The Captain looked grim. "I, sir, am all in favor of a return to the harem and the yashmak."

He wasn't really, but he took a sadistic pleasure in hearing Julia Crane gasp indignantly. He turned once again to his Martian companion and added softly, "in fact I think we would have done better to have left the whole mob of them permanently stranded on Procyon Three." Then, realizing his faux pas. "I mean, except you, and your friends of course."

He strode away from the dinner table alone in a mood that threatened to spoil his digestion. Why did that girl have to be so unpleasant? Like everyone else he had been looking forward to the time when the ship would shift over from ultra-space to normal, and they would all be able to get around and eat comfortably again. And then at the very first meal. . . .

THE flagship *Pride of Sol* was huge even by twenty-fifth century standards, and Jordan's private quarters were nearly a half mile away from the officers' dining hall. There were moving footways that could shorten the journey to a matter of seconds, but somehow he felt that stretching his legs might help to soothe him.

Few people walked in these days of speedier and more comfortable alternatives, and he expected to have the long stretch of corridor to himself. He was a little startled to turn a corner and come upon Julia Crane standing in his path, her arms akimbo and her head thrown erect.

"Oh . . . er . . . Hullo," he said feebly.

She did not deign to answer his greeting. "Where can we meet so that we are sure of being alone?" she demanded.

He looked mildly astonished. Girls had said that sort of thing to him before. But not in that tone of voice, nor with that expression on their faces.

"Why . . . what for?".

"We're going to fight," she snapped.

"We're not," he responded promptly. He knew that nowadays women did insist on this means of asserting their equality, and that some men took them at their word; but he wasn't going to have any part of it. Aside from the fact that she was a woman, he objected to fighting anybody. He regarded personal combat as a stupid, atavistic method of settling quarrels, and much beneath the dignity of an officer of the Space Navy.

She moved so quickly that he had no time to dodge. The smack of her open hand against his face was like the sharp crack of a whip. The unexpected pain made him blink and he raised a hand to finger his burning cheek gently.

"That piece of childishness thoroughly confirms Admiral Blighton's opinion that women are not fit to be in the Space Navy," he said grimly. Then as the pain bit more deeply he added hotly. "You ought to be spanked for it."

"Why don't you try," she jeered. "Come on, you know the ship better than I do. Where can we meet?"

"In one of the lifeboat locks," he answered grimly. "They are never visited except for routine inspection once a week. We'll make it number four, as that is handiest for your cabin."

"Very well. How do I reach it?"

He gave her concise instructions, and she nodded. "Good. I'll meet you there in a quarter of an hour's time."

When he slid aside the door of the lock ten minutes later she was already waiting for him. She had switched on the light nearest the door, and stood in the center of its harsh, blue-white glare, with the curving bulk of the life-boat swelling high in the dimness behind. He permitted himself a moment of sardonic amusement at the sight of her. She had changed into a skin-tight, white sweater and a pair of blue slacks that flared widely at the ankle. Trust a woman, he thought, to wear something that looked graceful, even if it would hamper her footwork.

Not that it would make much difference. He had the whole thing planned in his mind. He would feint and spar a little until she tried to land her first blow. Then he would grab her wrist and with a neat jujitsu trick that he knew bring her face downwards across his extended knee. After that he would have the pleasure of returning the slap she had given him with interest, but on a rather less dignified part of her anatomy than her face.

He went over to one corner of the lock, removed his rather stiff uniform jacket and the belt that carried the holster of his posigun, leaving himself clad only in trousers and shirt.

"Ready?" she asked.

SHE squared her fists and advanced on him. As she did so a low, thrumming note filled the compartment, and in the ceiling a red light began to wink intermittently. Immediately he leaped for his belt and snatched out his gun.

Her eyes widened, and her lip curled in contempt. "Why you dirty. . . ."

"Don't be a fool," he snapped as he shrugged into his jacket and belt, changing the gun from hand to hand to keep it at the ready. "Do you think I need a posigun to handle you? That was a general alarm that just sounded."

She dropped her hands. "Oh! Is that bad?"

"I've only heard three in my fifteen years of service."

A microphone hidden somewhere near gave a few preparatory rattles, then began to roar.

"Attention. Some or all of the Martians picked up with the rescued party were Prexlans. An unsuccessful attempt has been made to sabotage the main engines. The perpetrators have temporarily escaped and are loose in the ship. All members of the crew will arm themselves and remain at the alert. All members of the rescued party, human and Martian, will surrender themselves to the first member of the crew they meet, and will consider themselves under arrest until their bona-fides have been established. If any member of the rescued party resists arrest crew are instructed to shoot. Disable if feasible, kill if necessary."

The girl's face was pale beneath the blue-white light. "Drastic, that last bit," she commented. "Consider me as under arrest. But who or what are Prexlans?"

"They're a clique of Martian fanatics who resent the overlordship of the Council of the United Worlds. Mars for the Martians, and all that. . . . Apparently that wreck of yours on Procyon Three was just a put-up job to get them aboard this ship."

"But I thought Mars agreed by an overwhelming majority to join the Union."

"It did. The C.U.W. has brought peace and prosperity to the Solar system, and most Martians are more than content to leave it that way. But there have been plenty of

instances in the history of our own planet of minority parties who have been ignominiously defeated at the polls turning to terrorism to get what they want."

She nodded. And as the initial shock of the announcement passed off she began to recover something of her former mood. "And of course the wonderful Space Navy, too good for mere females to be allowed to join, can't find their headquarters?"

"They haven't any. They work on a loosely connected cell system. We've smashed up a dozen different hideouts, but there are still others."

The microphone rattled again and a tinny voice crackled. "Attention. Some of the saboteurs have avoided arrest and are making in the direction of lifeboat dock number four, probably with the intention of stealing the boat and escaping in it. All members of the crew in that vicinity will go immediately to the dock and defend it."

"Number four! That's us." Captain Jordan glanced round. The place was bare and empty except for the hundred foot long cigar-shape of gleaming metal that nestled in her cradle, her nose pointed slightly upwards. "The stanchions supporting the boat are wide enough to hide us. If we get behind one of them we can pick the swines off as they enter."

She followed him as he ran. Then just as he was about to dive out of sight she made a snatch at his gun, twisted it out of his hand, and plunged through the open door of the lifeboat. Momentarily he was too stunned even to move, then he raced after her. He caught her in the narrow metal corridor that ran across the center of the boat.

She hugged the gun to her, her eyes defying him to take it. "*You,* of all people, helping *them,*" he snarled as he grappled with her. "Why, you little fool, before the C.U.W. educated Mars their females were treated like cattle. . . ."

"I wasn't helping them," she panted. "I'm . . . I was going to hide on the boat."

He relaxed a little. "Oh. I get it now. Brave girl uncovers hideout of criminals single-handed, and shows nasty prejudiced Admiral how wrong he has been." He shook his head. "You're a plucky kid but it won't work. Be sensible and give me that gun before our friends get here."

She wriggled suddenly from his grip and disappeared through one of the doors that lined the corridor. He went after her.

They found themselves in a long, narrow, compartment, dark except for a thin beam of light that filtered through a small transparent panel set in the ceiling. Like grotesque effigies of recently hanged men a dozen space suits dangled by their necks from hooks on the wall. She ran to the end of the room and turned, still holding the gun.

He reached for her. "Quiet. They're here!" she whispered fiercely.

He stopped. Half muffled by the thick walls of the lifeboat there came the sound of running feet and shouting voices, followed by the swish of a fired posigun. Then the door of the boat clanged into position, and there were scurrying movements close at hand. An instant later the light disappeared and the man and girl were nauseated by a sudden sensation of weightlessness. Caught by surprise they had no time to relax the muscular push normally exerted by their legs to keep their bodies upright. Reaction sent them soaring to the ceiling, where they bumped gently, and then began to float downwards again.

"Well," he said bitterly in the darkness. "You've got your way. We're going with them."

Her voice was strained as she answered him. "Yes. But wasn't that rather dangerous for them, going straight into ultra so close to something as big as the *Pride of Sol?*"

"It's always dangerous to go in or out of ultra close to a gravity field. That's why we use rockets near a planetary system, although they're so slow. Easy enough to see why they took the risk, though. In normal space they could be traced and pursued, but there's no known method of tracing a ship in Ultra."

She heard him swear softly as at the end of a slow bounce their heads hit the ceiling again.

Then he added thoughtfully, "in a way it's lucky for us that they had to shift spaces."

"Why lucky?"

"You don't need rockets in Ultra. You just sort of ride the etheric strains. If we'd been rocketing the pilot's gauges would

have told him in a second that there was extra weight aboard somewhere."

"I see."

II

IN THE corridor outside soft footsteps sounded. Through the crack of the opened door of their hiding place there flashed a sliver of golden light. Instinctively the two pushed a hand against the ceiling above and propelled themselves into the further corner of the room, which was still in darkness. Unused to weightlessness the girl gave herself an off-center thrust, set herself rotating. Jordan grabbed one of the space-suit hooks with one hand, and held her with the other. They waited, holding their breath.

The footsteps passed, but the light remained on. Jordan whispered. "Stop here. I'll go and reconnoitre."

She started to protest. "Let me go. I. . . ." But before she finished he was gone through the door, progressing like an underwater swimmer.

He returned in a few minutes. "Five of 'em," he grunted briefly. "All in the pilot's cabin."

"Only five? We might stand a chance of taking the ship if we made a surprise attack."

He shook his head. "The cabin's screened with monopen."

"Oh!" She'd seen the stuff before and knew its properties. Bankers and Jewelers in the more lawless parts of the Universe were fond of erecting barriers of it between the public and their assistants. Just as polarized glass would pass light one way only, so monopen would resist the lethal ray of a posigun in one direction, and let it through freely in the other. It couldn't stand up against heavy ordnance, of course, or even against a hand weapon for very long, but it afforded enough protection to preclude all possibility of a surprise attack against those on the right side of it.

"Best thing we can do is to get into space suits," he said. "In ultra you can get way past Proxima Centauri in a day or so. Their hideout isn't likely to be that far from Sol. Which means that they will probably be reverting to normal space in the next few hours."

"Why space suits?" she demanded. "Surely they will only hamper us if it comes to a fight?"

"We won't fight," he retorted grimly. "We'll run away. When we're in suits we'll get into an air lock and evacuate it. And the moment they get us into normal space we'll jump out, hoping that the pilot will wait a second or two before cutting in his rockets."

"You're getting very bossy, aren't you?" she burst in stormily. "Considering that jumping this ship was my idea."

"And as soon as we're in open space," he went on, patiently ignoring her interruption, "we'll use the suit reaction-jets to get as far away from this boat as we can."

"And then. . . .?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Depends on where we are. If it's a planet that they take us to we'll try to land on it. If it's a large self-contained ship floating free in space . . . well, maybe there will be an air lock or something left unguarded. Either way our chances of survival are pretty slim."

"Afraid?" she jeered. "Well, nobody asked you to come. And anyway I don't like your idea."

He thrust one hand against the wall and floated over to the hanging space suits. "Be thinking of something better while you get this on," he said as he flung one towards her.

She snorted but began to scramble into the suit.

"And for the love of Mike don't switch your power-pack on till I'm in mine," he said.

"I know," she replied as she fiddled with an obdurate fastener. "They give out dangerous radiations, don't they."

"Alpha and anything up. Better not turn on our radios either, until we're out of the ship. We'll touch helmets if we want to talk."

HE FLIPPED his headpiece into place then snatched up the gun that she had left floating while she donned her suit. She opened her mouth to protest again, but he was already on his way, beckoning to her to follow. Her heart was thumping in her throat as they floated out of their shadowed

hiding place into the brilliantly lit corridor, but nobody was around to see them. He led her to the end of the passage, then turned left into another. Finally they came to a circular metal hatch, near the tail of the ship. He braced his feet against the wall, pulled gently at the latch and the cover swung aside.

The lock was even darker and more cramped than the closet had been, but she could hear him fumbling around. Then there came the soft swish of escaping air, and she felt the joints of her suit go rigid with internal pressure.

His helmet clinked against hers. "Nothing to do now but wait," he said. "Do you know how to use the reaction jets?"

"Yes."

"Good. I. . . . Out! Quickly!"

The absolute darkness had suddenly been broken by a pale, ghostly radiance from a myriad glowing points. In unfamiliar patterns they sprawled across three-quarters of the visible sky, occulted at the lowest part by a semi-circle of black.

His reaction-jets streaked redly. Hurriedly she fumbled at the buttons that controlled hers. The metal fingers of her suit followed faithfully every movement made by her flesh and blood ones inside, but she was hampered by the unfamiliarity of having them extend six inches beyond her usual reach. Before she had mastered their use she heard beneath her feet the roar of the ship's rockets. The sudden forward surge pinned her down for long seconds. Then she found the button she needed, and was jerked abruptly out into free space.

The stars wheeled round her crazily. The long, slim shape of the ship was dark, visible only because it hid the spangles behind it, and as she cartwheeled the patch of blackness flickered in and out of view like a badly projected cinema film. Suddenly it belched crimson flame, and instantly, close to her head, a glowing sphere of radiance came into being.

She was too dazed for the moment to realize that someone was firing explosive pellets at her. The panic that swept through her came from the silence and the loneliness and the insane movement of the universe about her. Then she came to her senses and switched on her radio.

Jordan's voice came in. Plainly he had been speaking for some time. " . . . knew it from their gauges. Fire your jets erratically. We'll make almost impossible targets."

"All right," she answered shakily. "But, where are we? I mean, where shall I make for?"

"There's a planet of sorts around," he said with a grim chuckle, "though the way you're somersaulting I can't say whether you'd regard it as being up or down. Anyway, don't worry about it just yet. Keep your jets at half power and you'll just naturally fall the right way."

As she used them she grew more skillful at the control of the reaction-jets, and at length she was able to stop her body from whirling. Below her, now, she could see the dark mass of the planet, jerking about as she changed her speed and direction every second or so.

A half-a-dozen more of the glowing spheres burst around them. Then the rockets of the ship flared swiftly, and, crimson now from their reflection on her metallic hide, she dwindled in size.

"They've. . . . They've given up," she commented.

"Yeah. They've figured that we can't land anywhere but on the planet, so why waste shots on us? It seems they know their planet. For that matter, now I've had time to think about it I believe I do too."

She saw his figure, mannikin-like in the distance, revolve slowly. "I thought so," he said. "It's Hades."

"Is that a name or a description?"

"Both. It's little more than a chunk of ice, really. What atmosphere there is is frozen solid, and the primitive life forms can neither be fed on nor fraternized with."

"Oh. . . . And how far is it from Sol?"

"About a light year. Strictly speaking it isn't a planet at all. Doesn't follow an orbit round the Sun or any other Star. Just seems to be wandering, although the astrogators haven't enough data on it yet to say where to."

THE planet was a huge black sphere beneath them now, and they were both using their jets to check their rate of fall. For a while they descended silently. Then she exclaimed, and pointed to a small patch of

orange light that had appeared on the ebon surface.

"That would be their living-dome," he said. "Lighting up for the ship to come in."

"Then that's where we're landing," she said firmly. "We've got to winkle them out of there somehow, and take the place over."

"Fat chance," he grunted. "We'll be burned down for sure if they catch us anywhere near it."

Nevertheless he followed her as she directed her jets towards the glowing point. There didn't seem to be much else they could do.

Eager to regain confidence in herself after her scare out in space she would have gone straight to the dome if he had let her. But he insisted that they land well away from it, and in the end she gave in.

They touched ground on a level surface amid a group of softly rounded hillocks. Everywhere was deep shadow, relieved only slightly by the ghostly, grey-white glimmer of powdery frozen gasses under the dim starlight.

The dome was nothing but a vague orange glow on the horizon.

"Turn your radio low, don't show any lights, and mind how you move around," he cautioned.

"Sure. I. . . . Oooooh!"

Her scream was terror-filled. Instinctively he started to run towards her, forgetting in his urgency his own precepts. At the third step he took the clumsy toe of his suit caught in a miniature crevasse. He fell forward.

Babbling apologies she raced over to him. "I'm . . . I'm sorry. I didn't mean to squeal like that. There were some horrible spider-like things as big as the palm of your hand crawling over me. And I hate spiders."

"Zero-bugs," he grunted. "They're harmless. It's the radiation from your power-pack that attracts them. They live by boring for the radioactive minerals." He tried to rise to his feet, then fell back again. "Hell!"

"Are you hurt?" she asked anxiously.

"My ankle. It's either sprained or broken."

She knelt down, clumsily trying to probe through the stiff surface of his suit with her unfeeling, metal pseudo-fingers.

"No good," he said briefly. "You can't do anything without taking my suit off. And that would be instant death in a temperature about three degrees above absolute zero."

Once more he tried to get up, and once more he sank back with a groan. She waited, wincing, for him to reproach her for getting them into this jam, or to jeer at her, after all her vaunted courage, for being scared of spiders.

She felt disproportionately grateful when instead he said, "You were right. We should have tried to capture the ship while we had the chance. Now we're stuck out here with no water, no food, and air enough for only twelve hours. And I'm crippled!"

"Oh, don't worry about it. We're going to win out yet," she replied shakily, adding, more to convince herself than him, "when this is over you and the Admiral will have a space recruit that you won't dare reject, even if she is a woman."

She fumbled at the side of her suit, irritably brushing off a particularly large specimen of the zero-bugs. "Aren't there portable atomic-convertors packed on these things somewhere?"

"Lower down at the side," he replied. "They won't be any use though. They can't construct any complicated carbon compounds, so you can't make food with them. And if you made air or water they'd freeze immediately."

"That wasn't what I had in mind," she said enigmatically. She straightened herself. "See you later." And she set off in the direction of the dome.

"Hey, come back," he shouted. "You can't go near that place. Your power pack would set all their geigers clucking like agitated hens. They'd know as soon as you came within a couple of hundred yards of them."

"I'll be all right," she called back, her voice fading into the distance.

"And if you switch your power off your heating will stop and you'll freeze," he added, raising his voice still further.

She took no notice, but went on her way. He thought of turning up the power of her radio so that his voice would continue to reach her.

"Can't do that though," he muttered. "It'll carry to the dome, and somebody inside might be listening."

III

HE TRIED to hop along on one foot after her but the clumsiness of his suit made his balance bad, and after traveling a dozen feet his ankle collapsed. He lay where he fell, sweating both with the agony from his hurt and apprehension for the girl.

It was nearly half-an-hour later that she returned. By that time he was close to fainting.

"As I expected they didn't come out after me," she said. "I imagine they were content to sit inside and chuckle at a vision of us wandering round and round the dome, trying to get in, until we died of exposure."

"And what have you been doing?" he rasped between his teeth.

"I guessed that with all this frozen oxygen around they'd find it more convenient to gasify it with heat than fit a huge convertor," she said. "So I dug around till I found the mouth of their inlet pipes. In about five minutes it will be sucking in a couple of pounds of chlorine for them."

He managed to chuckle despite his pain. "That should annoy 'em. It won't kill them, though, if that's what you're hoping. Their noses and eyes will tell them what's wrong long before the gas reaches a lethal concentration."

"I know," she said calmly. "But at least it should convince them that we are dangerous enough to be worth coming after."

"You've got something there," he responded soberly. "We might as well face the fact that we're going out anyway. It'll be a lot quicker and more painless to go by their posiguns. And we might have the luck to take one or two of them with us."

"We aren't going out. We're going in—into the dome. That chlorine wasn't my only trick." Then, hurriedly, before he had time to ask any more questions, she said, "can you walk on your good leg if I support you on the other side?"

"I think so. But why? It's no use trying to hide. Wherever we walk on this powdery stuff we leave a visible trail."

"Never mind. I want to get on top of that next hillock. It'll give us a wider range of vision."

"A wider range of vision? We can't see more than a dozen yards anyway."

She put her hand under his shoulder. "Come on. Up!"

Grunting, he allowed her to have her way.

A certain amount of numbness had settled in his ankle now, and though it still hurt as it dangled at least the pain was bearable so long as he did not have to put any weight on his foot.

Although they had to feel their way carefully for hidden cracks they made fair progress across the level ice; but climbing the powdery, slithery surface of the hillock was a different matter. At length however she managed to drag him to the top. There they rested, panting, and peering through the gloom.

"We shan't be able to see any better from here, for all our trouble," he complained.

"Wait."

He waited, straining his eyes through the star-glimmer. A tiny smile was twitching the corners of his lips. She was a pugnacious little devil, but he had to admit she had pluck. And brains. Though the stars alone knew what she was up to now.

"There!" she exclaimed suddenly and fiercely. "Quick! Your gun!"

HE LET his breath out through his lips in a slow, soft whistle. More than a quarter of a mile away small patches of vaguely outlined luminosity had sprung into being, bright against the dull gray background of the frozen planet's surface. In the fraction of a second that it took him to snatch his gun from its holster the patches flickered and coalesced, and, like a projected image being brought into focus, became the sharply-limned figures of four space-suited Martians.

The range was really too long, but he cradled his gun carefully, flicked the button, and had the satisfaction of seeing one of the figures throw up its arms and plunge over backwards. The other three began pawing frantically at themselves, at the same time running forward to help their companion. One of them began to fire back, but his target was invisible and he did no more than cause miniature explosions of sudden vaporization in the frozen gases around. Jordan tried another two shots without any results. Then his fourth attempt proved

lucky again, and another Martian collapsed, writhing.

The remaining two had had enough. They grabbed their still-moving companion by the arms, and started to drag him away rapidly. The one they had left behind lay unstirring. Jordan tried another half-a-dozen shots, but the range was becoming progressively greater, and he had no more successes.

"Damn!" said the girl heartily. "I laid the trap too close to their dome. I should have allowed them to get nearer to us."

"No need to swear at yourself," he chuckled. "We're doing fine. One dead, one wounded. But how in the universe did you manage to make such a good target out of them?"

"Zinc sulphide," she said briefly. "The stuff that glows in the presence of alpha rays. They used to use it in the old-fashioned spinthariscope, and for the luminous dials of watches and things like that. I made some with the convertor, and smothered a few hundred of the zero-bugs with it." She shuddered. "Horrible little beasts. I hated touching them, even with artificial fingers."

"I understand," he laughed. "Nobody would really mind the presence of four or five hostile Martians, of course. But spiders! . . . Brrrh."

There was a responsive little quiver of amusement in her voice as she answered. "Keep quiet. I'm trying to think of a way of getting the rest of them."

"I believe you could do it too," he acknowledged. "But I'm afraid you won't get the chance. The next move is theirs."

"I expect so," she said. "But perhaps we can counteract it in advance." She sat down upon the snowy surface, cupped her chin in her hand. "We know that there can't be more than four of them in there now, because the dome didn't light up until the ship arrived, which means that it was empty before. If only we could bring them out again."

"They'll be watching their geigers like hawks now," he said. "You won't be able to get close to them like you did before."

"No," she agreed. "But perhaps . . ."

She broke off, and the pair of them jerked their heads skywards. A streak of of scarlet flame was lengthening up from the horizon, reflecting sullen red from the metal shape at the tip of it, and staining with ruby the wide expanse of white around them.

"The ship!" he said fiercely. "They're going to hunt us down with that! Burrow. Under the surface."

Like a pair of agitated crustacea in their stiff suits they wriggled and scrabbled to bury themselves in the soft snow. They found solid ice less than six inches beneath the surface of it.

Julia sat up. "No good," she snapped. "Let's roll down the hill into the shadow. That's black enough to hide us."

It was. But as the ship above them circled the angle of the light thrown from its tail changed. The strip of shadow began to narrow.

"Wriggle round the hillock. It must be growing wider the other side," said Jordan. His voice was hoarse with strain. The sudden movements he had been forced to make had renewed the agony in his foot.

"We shan't be able to keep this up," she said as they ploughed their way round to where the patch of darkness grew invitingly longer. "I've got to think of something."

"I admit you're good," he said tensely. "But I doubt if even you can coax them out and within shooting distance."

"No . . ." she said thoughtfully. Then added suddenly. "How many does it take to operate one of those ships?"

"Three."

"That means that only one wounded Martian has been left to guard the dome."

"Yeah. But he's securely locked in."

"Maybe. But there must be an electric eye device to open the air lock, or how did the ship get in there in the first place, with nobody around to open up for it?"

"There probably is. Most domes have 'em. But if you're thinking of breaking the detector ray with your body . . ."

IV

THE ship overhead had drawn some little way away by now, and the light around them had faded to a smoky pink. As he

spoke she leaped suddenly to her feet, and darted across to the shadow thrown by the next hillock.

"Come back!" he shouted frantically. "It won't work. All domes are fitted with panels of monopen. As soon as he hears his geigers clucking he'll start looking out for you, and burn you down before you can get near the place."

She was running to the next patch of shade by now. Her voice floated back to him, fading as she ran. "Perhaps. But if I . . ." And then her words became unintelligible.

"Damn the crazy little fool," he muttered between his teeth. "She'll be killed for sure."

In his horror at the thought of the danger she was running into he forgot that out here was certain death for her anyway. The fiercely urgent desire to stop her drove him to his feet. The pain in his ankle became a red flame that seared through every nerve of him until snow-covered hillocks and black, star-spangled sky danced and quivered in front of his swimming eyes. With a groan he collapsed.

"Mustn't faint!" he whispered to himself. "Mustn't faint . . ."

He rolled over, and supporting himself on his hands and his one good leg he started to drag himself towards the distant dome.

The ship was returning now, and all about him the light brightened to a vivid scarlet. Sobbing, half blinded by the sweat that ran down his face, he scrambled into the protection of the next mound, and lay flat until the danger was past. Then he forced himself up again, and crawled on.

As he went forward the journey started to take on some of the quality of unreal horror that is in nightmares. Push on through a mist of pain. . . . Hide from the brightening light. . . . Push on again. . . . There had never been anything in all time but this fantastic hastening towards an unremembered goal. Never would be anything else. . . .

He was jerked back to stark reality by a rising and falling wailing sound that came through his radio. He knew it for what it was, and a sobbing groan racked him. An alarm call for the ship. From inside the dome. That could mean only one thing. Julia had been found. And was almost certainly dead.

Something seemed to collapse inside him. He watched dully as the ship, a crimson fish with a tail of flame, sailed back over his head. He was on a flat, open surface, and must have been fully visible; but he was beyond caring.

Apparently, though, the Martians in the ship were too concerned about the alarm call to notice him. They went straight past without making any hostile move. He drooped his head.

He might not have seen a momentary, ghostly flash of violet light if he had not been so close to the dome. As it was the coming of it made a barely perceptible quiver in the red glare beneath his eyes. His head snapped upwards immediately. The discharge of a posi hand weapon was invisible, but so huge was the power used by some of the heavier, mounted guns that their bolts made a streak of jagged color, like violet lightning, every time they were fired. If someone was shooting at the ship . . . ?

He was in time to see the metal shape above him quiver along its whole length. Huge cracks appeared in it, then from somewhere inside flame leaped outwards until the whole thing was engulfed and became a center of intolerable glare. Before the first of the scraps of over-heated metal from the wreck began to shower around him—making the surface bubble and steam where they touched—he was dragging himself forward again. In him now there was hope so bright and splendid that he hardly dared to put it to the test.

In the soft, orange light that was seeping from the dome he saw that the airlock was closed. Fortunately, though, the black, staring eye of the automatic lock was set low, and he was able to drag his body high enough to break the ray that activated it. The tall doors slid aside then closed behind him as he went through. There came the hiss of inrushing air.

Before it finished he was staring round him frantically. Close to the entrance, almost at his feet, lay the crumpled, reptilian body of a Martian. Beside him the dome's alarm, its switch still thrown, was broadcasting its warning cry into surrounding

space. Ten feet further on, sagging over the controls of a weapon strategically placed to defend the lock lay Julia, still in her space suit. She did not move.

He threw back his helmet and gulping deeply at the clean, sweet air he crawled over to her. With fingers that fumbled from the urgency of their task he tore at the fastening of her suit. As he threw back the stiff coverings a blast of utter cold hit him.

"Oh, God!" he mumbled. "So that's how you beat his geiger detectors. Switched off your power. . . . You little fool."

Her eyes flickered open, and with blue, pinched lips she achieved a tiny smile. "I—my legs. I think they're frostbitten. Right the way up." And then she fainted again.

AS SHE swam back into consciousness beside her sat Jordan, with a huge, dial-covered panel in front of him. He was dressed once more in only his uniform, and his ankle was monstrous with swathed bandages.

"How are you feeling?"

"All right," she answered. "But. . . . My legs?"

His smile broadened. "Just like a woman. Well, you can thank your lucky stars that this place sported an up-to-date medical center. And that Jansky invented his infra-radiator when he did. Twenty years ago you'd have lost them both. As it is, you'll be walking around on them again soon.

"Luckily these lads provided themselves with a top drawer tight-beam transmitter. I've fed it a tape so that it'll send out a continuous message telling where we are and what's happened. Now I'm adjusting it to fan out over the Mars-Earth-Venus orbit. Of course the signals have to go via ordinary space. They'll take a year to get there, and when they do they'll be pretty feeble. But somebody is sure to pick them up sooner or later. Meanwhile we'll have to wait. It won't be too hard. This place has just about everything. Including a library, if you can read Martian."

* * *

They were lucky. The message was picked up almost as soon as it reached the vicinity of the Solar system. It happened that the nearest ship to them at the time was the *Pride of Sol* herself, and just thirteen months after the wrecking of her stolen lifeboat the enormous warship was hovering over the bleak surface of Hades. Another lifeboat nosed its way down, sidled through the airlock of the dome, and then returned to her parent ship.

Among the group that waited to greet the two was Admiral Blighton himself, smiling broadly. "Well," he said, "I hear the pair of you have covered yourselves with glory since we saw you last. What exactly have you been up to?"

Captain Tom Jordan saluted stiffly, and in crisp tones made a full report on all that had happened, giving the girl every ounce of the credit that was due to her.

The Admiral nodded and turned to her, twinkling benignly. She flushed under his gaze, and tossed her head.

"Well?" she demanded. "Are you prepared to admit now that women are fit to be in the Space Navy?"

The Admiral rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "No denying that you are a credit to your sex m'dear," he said. "Tell me, if I withdrew the ban, would you be ready to join us on our next cruise? We start in about a month's time. Be gone a year."

Her flush grew deeper. "I. . . . That isn't fair. I . . . I mean you can *see* I can't possibly come. Especially next month . . ."

"No?" He raised his eyebrows, mischief dancing in his eyes.

"I. . . . I don't see why you are looking like that. There's nothing wrong. The Space Code says if two people are cut off from all centers of civilization for a period longer than three months then their mutual consent shall constitute a valid marriage contract. And Tom and I . . ."

"My dear child," he said. "I wasn't suggesting for a moment that there was anything wrong. But don't you see now why we can't have women in the Navy?" He leaned over and patted her on the shoulder, his twinkle growing even more rosily benign. "Tell you what I will do, though. If it's a boy I promise to see that when he grows up he ships on the *Pride of Sol* herself."

DEATH STAR

By JAMES McKIMMEY, Jr.

For twenty long unholy years Hurtz, the pilot, dreamed of retirement... and found his "acre of heaven" on a Death Star.

HURTZ went through the automatic motions of preparing himself for their landing on the small unnamed planet, but each thing he did was a wasted motion because it was really the boy, Jones, who was going to put the rocket down. And what could Hurtz do now?

Hurtz touched his rough cheek with the back of his hand and swore silently. The hard, aging muscles of his body were taut, and although the lines about his eyes had deepened, his eyes, blue and sparkling, still retained their old ferocity. His eyebrows, although nearly completely gray now, intensified that ferocity with their thickness.

Jones, the boy, moved his hands and the rocket made its turn clumsily, pointing its blazing fins at the strange globe beyond.

Hurtz shook his head and asked himself why he had ever tried to help this cocky, all-knowing kid with the thin mouth and short-clipped hair.

The boy had fought everything Hurtz had tried to do for him, and right now Hurtz knew, even before he said it, that the boy would respond in the same way he had since the trip started:

"I think you're doing all right," Hurtz said, and he tried to keep the tone of his voice casual, as though he really meant what he said.

The boy glanced at him briefly with insolent eyes. "I know I am," he said.

Hurtz had to clamp his jaw shut tightly to keep from saying anything more.

There was hardly any time involved in this landing, but each second stretched out to an individual eternity. The distant globe came up to meet them steadily, enlarging its circumference, and the roar of the jets was thunderous after the quiet free movement they had made through space.

There was nothing left for Hurtz to do now but wait, and he placed his hands on his knees, raising his curled fingers, dropping them, in a monotonous silent tapping.

It isn't right. None of it. The feel of it —the speed, the sound, the very movement. It isn't going to work, and why not, for God's sake, on this one last run?

As they slipped down through the atmosphere of the planet, Hurtz knew that he had been very foolish and sentimental and very, very stupid for having asked to accompany the boy. The boy's first trip. Hurtz's last. But if Hurtz still believed in the premonitions that he could feel to the marrow of his tired bones, this might be the last trip for both of them.

He watched the boy and he wished he could take control now before it was too late. But this was the boy's own run, his rocket, and there was nothing for Hurtz to do but wait.

Seconds now, and Hurtz thought of all the times he had done just what the boy was trying to do now. Twenty years of it, from globe to globe. Stretching the fingers of exploration, all to make the money and finally tip his damned hat and say, "Thank you. It was nice, and now I'm going to retire and let some other poor slob take my place." But when the time came for him to do and say just that, he had climbed in for one more ride, just so a kid who didn't want any help might have had a better chance to get along in this rotten exploratory service than Hurtz had been given.

The distance between the rocket and the widening surface of the planet was disappearing, and in that last interval, Hurtz thought again of his dream, the dream he had been carrying in his brain for all of these years.

EBERLE

THE width and breadth of his own land, that section of Mars where he had stood twenty years ago and watched with hungry eyes, and then ever since had sweated and cried and suffered to own. His land, with its silent rolling hills and quiet green valleys. With its sweet sloping clearing where he would place his house, the rippling brook singing softly nearby.

The only place he had seen in any system that had the peace of it, the magnificence of it. His land. Paid for finally and bound by legal protection, waiting for him. And here he was, letting the reward for those twenty years drift away by sitting beside a crazy, over-confident infant, who was sure as hell going to crash this rocket.

When the crash came, however, Hurtz was still surprised somehow, but only until he fell into the depthless darkness.

When he awoke he saw that the ship rested at an odd angle. One whole side of the compact cabin had become a gaping open tear that looked away to the horizon of this new world. Hurtz had a thin cut over his left eye and a collection of stinging bruises, nothing more serious.

Jones, on the other hand, appeared to have been smashed brutally about the legs, and from where Hurtz lay he could see the ugly cut in the boy's head and the unnatural angle of the boy's right arm.

"Jones?" he said to the motionless form, and then with effort he crawled to the boy who was still clamped tightly into the swivel seat before the instrument panel.

His hands searched and found two broken bones in the arm and leg. The cut in the boy's head had obviously touched bone. Hurtz gathered medicine, bandages and splints from the first-aid compartment. He swabbed, bound, compressed, and covered the wounds of the boy. Then with teeth tight together he set the two bones with the rough skill of practical experience. When the splints were bound he loosened the boy's body from the binding straps and carried him to the rear bunk space of the cabin.

He tested the boy's pulse and regularity of breathing, then injected enough of relieving drug into the boy's blood to keep the full impact of pain away from his senses.

Hurtz returned to the front of the cabin to look over the damaged radio. Tentative inspection told him he could make sufficient repairs to send out a help call. But first, he knew, he would have to make an estimate of their position on this strange planet.

He strapped a pistol to his waist, donned his helmet and lowered himself to the ground. He looked about him. There was a bluish tint to the atmosphere that hovered over the rim of the circling trees. Yellow, pink and deep-white flowers with fragile petals nodded silently through the stretches of growth.

Another planet, his eyes told him, another simple damned planet, like the one before and the one before that. Vegetation and earth beneath another shining sun.

And this is what I've earned, he told himself. Instead of my land, my estate, my kingdom. His lips compressed and he hammered a fist against the side of the rocket.

Well, it's not going to be, he promised himself, starting his climb back to the cabin. Nothing is going to keep me from getting what I've earned. Nothing. He was swearing aloud when he pulled himself into the cabin.

JONES was watching as Hurtz straightened up inside the littered compartment.

Hurtz unstrapped his pistol belt and tossed it to the floor. "How do you feel, son?" he asked quietly.

The boy only stared at Hurtz.

"All right?" Hurtz said helpfully.

"All right, hell," the boy said in a thin monotone.

"You were pretty well banged up."

"That's news?"

"If you're still feeling pain I'll give you another shot."

"Why don't you save it for your head?"

Hurtz turned and went to the forward part of the cabin and the radio. He didn't want to listen to that high, whining voice; the boy was hurt and Hurtz recognized it, but Hurtz couldn't take too much more, from anyone, injured or not.

"I'm not going to live," the boy called after Hurtz.

Hurtz turned back to face the boy. "What the hell kind of talk is that?"

"I'm not going to live," the boy repeated in exactly the same tone.

"You're getting delirious."

"I'm getting dead."

"Listen," Hurtz said slowly, "I respect the fact that you've been smashed up, Jones, but I don't want any talk like that, do you understand?"

He tried to keep authority in his voice and at the same time, enough softness to give the boy assurance that Hurtz could take care of him. "We can have help here in no time," Hurtz continued. "The radio can be fixed, and the first thing you know you'll be bedded down in some pretty hospital with flowers, and . . ."

"This was your fault," the boy said, as though Hurtz had not been talking.

Hurtz closed his mouth slowly and his lips got thin. "Why don't you try to get some sleep?"

"Because I'm bleeding to death inside."

Hurtz blinked. It was a possibility, of course. The boy may have been hurt worse than Hurtz had thought.

With great effort the boy raised a bandaged hand to his lips and ran his tongue across the white gauze. The movement left a red streak. "You see?" he said. "You see that? I'm bleeding out my guts. I'll sleep, all right. I'll really sleep, and it'll be your fault, Hurtz."

"Listen, Jones," Hurtz said, deliberately lying, "you'll be all right. Don't you see?"

"No, damn you. No. And if you hadn't forced yourself onto this run, this wouldn't have happened."

"Jones," Hurtz said, trying to keep his voice soft. "These things just happen, that's all. This is nobody's fault. You fly these damned runs, you take your chances. But you're going to be all right, son."

"Don't call me that!" the boy said, and now his voice was higher, louder, and Hurtz could see a little of the blood showing on a corner of the boy's mouth. "Son, son! I'm as good a pilot as anybody. You or Gearing or Royce or anybody in the stinking service! I didn't need your damned help, and that's what did it. Sitting there, watching me every minute, making me tighten up until I couldn't fly a kite. It's your fault, and why the hell couldn't you have died or gone back to your stupid Martian farm . . ." The boy was crying. A thin trickle of blood crawled down his chin.

Hurtz took a step forward. "Kid, listen. I wanted to help you, and . . ."

"Keep the hell away from me!" the boy screamed.

Hurtz froze. He hadn't realized either how badly hurt the boy had been or how much resentment had lain beneath the boy's cold exterior. He was beginning to feel some of the guilt that was placed on him by the look in the boy's staring eyes. "But why?" he asked himself. "Why? When all he had wanted to do was help someone?"

"I know how you're feeling," Hurtz said, trying to be patient and calm. "I really do, but you can't blame anyone for this."

The boy remained silent and condemning, and Hurtz knew that his words were ringing hollowly in the cabin. Still he tried:

"Look. I've crashed before, on a dozen planets. But that's the way it works. And that's why I wanted to help you. I wanted to quit on this last one, don't you see? For twenty unholy years I've been trying to own a piece of my own land where I could say, 'This is my own world,' and what I tried to do by going with you, was make it easier for you. Because in you, I could see myself twenty years ago. Don't you see?"

The boy said nothing.

"I wanted to give it up and quit, but I thought if I could show you something, teach you something . . ." He cut the words short because he could feel himself pleading. There was no need for this. What he had done had been a sacrifice, and if the boy couldn't see that, then it was because he was hurt and in great pain.

"If I had a medal," the boy said hoarsely, "I'd shove it down your rotten throat."

Hurtz ran the palms of his hands down the sides of his trousers. "I'll give you another shot and then I'll get the radio set up. You'll be all right."

The boy shook his head slowly, the bright eyes never looking away from Hurtz. "You're not going to give me anything, and I'm not going to be all right."

"I can't waste more time, Jones. You are hurt. Bad. And I've got to get help." He turned abruptly and went back to the radio. There were only wires loosened and parts slightly shaken. No irreparable damage. His hands moved quickly.

When he heard the thump of the boy's

body hitting the floor of the cabin his stomach jumped. He turned, made a step forward, then halted.

The boy was stretched below the bunk. Blood was spilling from his mouth. But he was moving and alive, and in his hands now was the pistol Hurtz had dropped.

"What the hell are you doing?" Hurtz said.

But the boy was motioning with the pistol. "Stay where you are. Stay the hell where you are."

Hurtz waited, watching the way the boy lay on one of his arms, the broken one. The drug would be cutting out the pain to some extent, but he was breaking himself up. "Jones," Hurtz said, "for God's sake, you're killing yourself."

"Oh, no," the boy said, pointing the pistol. "*You're* killing me. I would have been all right, but you had to come along and this is your work, Hurtz. You're killing me. Now you're going to get your reward for that."

"Jones," Hurtz said, "if you think this was my fault, all right then. I'm suddenly very damned tired. I was tired before I started this, and it's worse now. If what went wrong was my fault, then I'm sorry. I really am. Do what you want to about it." Hurtz felt his energy draining out, and all he seemed to want to do at that moment was sit down and be quiet.

"I will," the boy answered, and Hurtz could hear the click of the safety going off. "I'll do exactly what I want to do about it. Are you ready?"

HURTZ watched the pistol in the boy's hands. Then he threw himself sideways, rolling across the cabin, trying to find protection as the pistol cracked again and again. When the sound had stopped and silence had settled itself heavily over the cabin, Hurtz lay half-sprawled, looking at the boy.

He knew none of the shots had struck him and the surprise of this made his position on the floor seem, for a moment, very foolish. Then he realized what the boy had hit—the radio and the replacement cabinet full of extra parts.

From his twisted position on the floor the boy had done a very effective job of splintering every part of their communication system.

Sudden anger ran through Hurtz and he pushed himself up to stand flush-faced, watching the smiling boy. "You've gone crazy," he said.

The boy shook his head, his fingers still clutching the pistol. "No. I really haven't. But you will, Hurtz. Because you aren't going anywhere now. No place at all. You're going to stay right here, because you can't get help now."

"The hell I can't," Hurtz said, but he knew as he said it, that the statement was a childish reaction, and that in truth he couldn't.

"The radio makes no difference to me," the boy said. "I'm going to die. In a very few minutes. I can feel it crawling up in me. But I'll die knowing you aren't going to get what you were after, Hurtz, any more that I did. I was good, damn you. I was a damned good pilot. I had it all in front of me, and you had to ruin it. But you aren't going to get anything now. Your land, Hurtz? Your stupid land. How about that? Who'll be sitting on that when you don't get back?"

"I feel sorry for you."

"Oh, that's good of you, Hurtz. You feel sorry for me while you spend the rest of your life stuck on this damned planet, will you? I enjoy the thought of that."

"I won't be here long," Hurtz bluffed.

"Oh, no?" the boy said, as more blood ran down his chin. "A planet half the size of Venus? No way to send them your position? You think they're going to send out a fleet to look for you over every inch of this globe? They couldn't find you in forty years."

Hurtz stood silent, his eyes thin as he watched the boy with the bleeding and smiling mouth. "I only wanted one thing, Jones. Just that one thing."

"That's right," the boy grinned. "Just that one thing, that section on Mars. Only now you aren't going to get it. You've got a one-track obsession, Hurtz, like a simple damned child, even though you've flown the universe for twenty years. This'll kill you, and you have my deepest regrets. Here," he said, sending the pistol spinning across the floor so that it stopped beside

Hurtz's boots. "There's a round left in it. I saved it. Just for you."

The boy began to laugh then, a kind of building laughter, that turned into choking. He put one hand to his throat and then rolled over suddenly, so that his eyes stared at the ceiling.

Hurtz looked at the dead boy for a long time, then he tapped the pistol very lightly with a toe of a boot. Finally he stepped to the broken radio and ran his fingers carefully over the useless equipment.

When he crawled from the cabin of the rocket to the ground, his movements were automatic. On the ground, he stood very quietly, his back against the ship, watching the tree leaves flutter faintly with the breeze.

The words of the boy were still in his brain, and he could still see the very clean-cut, very young, very dead face. So many times he'd thought of Jones as he had been himself, twenty years ago. It was almost as though he'd died up there himself. Worse, was the realization that what the boy had told him was right. Somehow, this was all his own fault. With his age and knowledge and experience, he'd taken the confidence out of the boy. The fears, the distrust, during the whole trip, had been communicated to Jones and so this was the result.

He shook his head a little and pushed himself away from the rocket. He began walking, step after step, unknowing of his movement. Jones had been right about another thing, too. Hurtz's one-track obsession. That was true, and it had been his motivation for everything he had done. To get one thing. A lifetime of blindness to everything else, while he lived through one day after another, year after year, to reach one individual day that was as surely lost now as the life of that boy in the rocket.

And so this is life. You fight your blind way through an entire lifetime, and when you get to the end there isn't anything at all. His hands knotted at his sides, and he walked with anger and a rising bitterness.

All at once he stopped, his eyes widening. The rim of trees had disappeared, and now in front of him lay the entire length and breadth of it. Detail for detail. *His* land, with its silent rolling hills and quiet green valleys. *His* land, with the sweet sloping clearing and the rippling brook singing softly beside it. *His* land right in front of his eyes.

But it couldn't be. A mirage, perhaps? Shock twisting the responses of his brain?

Yet when he had stood there, wide-eyed, examining, he knew that what he saw was reality and every blade of grass, every leaf, every drop of water in the singing brook was physically there. Inch for inch.

Lord, he thought, dropping to his knees. How could this be?

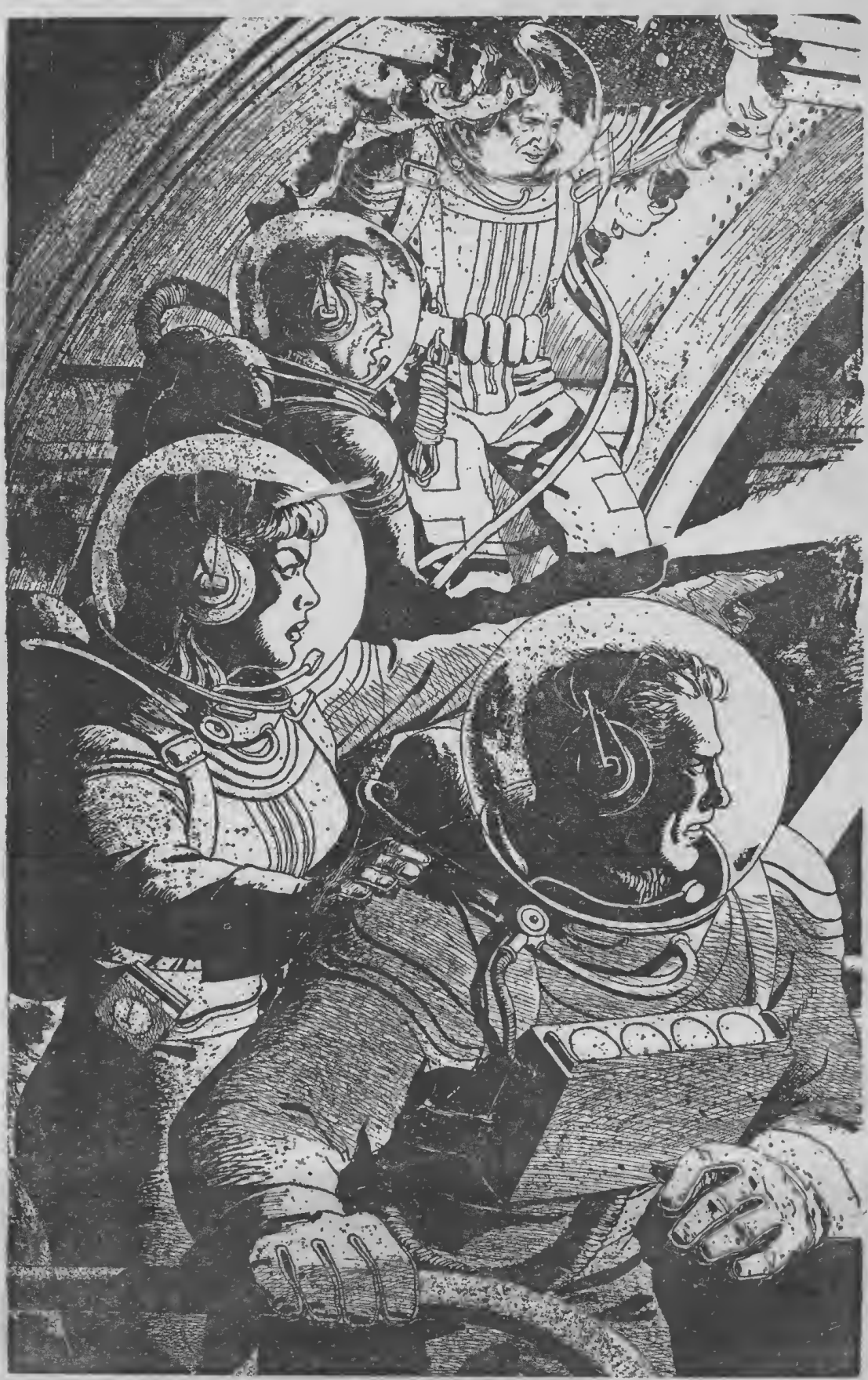
He thought about it as he looked and felt and thrilled. Perhaps, he thought, this was the way it was on other planets, when I couldn't see anything but a long-distant dream. Perhaps I could have had this a dozen times in my life, and all I would have had to do was take it. But why didn't I? Why couldn't I see this before? Did it take twenty years for me to start seeing what was in front of my eyes?

And why twenty years? Why this time and moment? Because for once in my life I forgot about my own damned desires and though about something and someone else? Is that it?

Hurtz climbed to his feet slowly. He didn't know and he asked no more questions of himself. He simply walked forward to it, forgetting the broken rocket and boy who broke it. He simply breathed deep of the perfumes of the hills and the valleys, and he stepped onto the sloping clearing, listening to the singing of the brook.

His nostrils failed to respond to the faintly acrid odor of wet dead leaves. His eyes failed to discover the rather sharp, ugly cut of the profile of the hills or the ungainly dip of the valleys. He was blind to the muddiness of the brook and his ears could not hear the sucking sound the water made as it pitched over dirty-colored rocks. He did not look, hear, or feel as he might have on that section of Mars, where the dream of twenty years might have disappeared like a speared bubble to become ugly reality. He was capable of none of the deadening response that might have been his, here on Mars, had he been a man who had not lived twenty years to offer, finally, one totally honest, unselfish motion in this universe.

He simply stepped to his reward, smiling.



THE ARK OF MARS

By LEIGH BRACKETT

There are men in space again. *The catastrophic words went out from Mars to damp Venus and frost-wracked Mercury; to the lunar colonies of Jupiter and Saturn. To all points of the system the warning was screamed:* Halt those fleeing star-pilgrims . . . those space-sons of the Ark of Mars.

THERE were no more men in space. The dark ships strode the ways between the worlds, lightless, silent, needing no human mind to guide them. The R-ships, carrying the freight and the passengers, keeping order, keeping the law, taking the Pax Terrae to the limits of the Solar System and guarding there the boundary which was not now ever to be crossed.

And there were no more men in space, no strong hands bridling the rockets, no eyes looking outward to the stars. But still upon the wide-flung worlds of Sol were old men who remembered, and young men who could dream.

The shadow of the sandstone pillar lay black upon the ground. Kirby slipped into it and stood still, looking back the way he had just come. Wilson stopped too, in the shadow, asking nervously,

"Nobody's following us, are they?"

Kirby shook his head. "I just wanted another look at the place. I don't know why, I've seen it often enough."

He had not been running. Neither he nor Wilson had been doing anything outwardly unusual, and yet Kirby was soaked with sweat and his heart was pounding. He could hear Wilson's heavy breathing, and knew it was the same with him.

"I'm scared," said Wilson. "Why should I be scared now?" He was a young man, long and narrow, with very strong, very sensitive hands.

"The last time," Kirby said. "We only need a few more hours now, after all these years . . ."

He let his voice trail off, as though he had been going to say more and decided not to, and Wilson muttered, "You're worried about Marsh."

"He's been taking too much interest in my department lately. I wish I knew . . ."

"Yeah. Kirby, let's go."

"Take it easy. A minute more isn't going to matter."

The sandstone pillar, linked by chains to a line of other pillars, marked the westward limit of the section reserved for the fliers of spaceport personnel. Behind Kirby, three miles away, the great crystal dome of Kahora rose up from the desert, glowing splendidly with light. Under its protective shell the pastel city bloomed like a hothouse garden, bathed in warmed and sweetened air. Kahora, the Trade City for Mars, where the business of a planet was done in luxury and comfort.

Out here where Kirby stood the everlasting wind blew thin and dry across the wastes of half a world, edged with bitter dust, and the only light there was at hand came from the swift low moons. But the spaceport that served Kahora blazed with a white glare, and the control towers were tipped with crimson stars.

Kirby stood in the shadow and looked at this place where he had spent the years of his living burial since they barred the rockets out of space. And now that he was through with it, now that he was never going to see it again, the hatred that he had for it could be let free. It was a long hate, an old hate. It had lived in him like a corrosive acid, poisoning everything he did or thought, poisoning the daytimes and the night-times and even the times he spent with Shari, which were the only good ones. He wanted to be rid of it.

Wilson muttered again about going, but Kirby didn't hear him. He was looking at the shops and sheds and multifarious buildings of the port, and in particular at the one called Parts and Supplies, which had been his personal prison. He was looking at the looming forest of towers that controlled the dark ships, that guided them back and forth between the worlds.

He was looking at the ships.

THEY lay in their massive cradles, ranged in rows according to type and size. The R-40 heavy freighters, the R-10 mixed carriers, the R-3 planetary patrol ships with the stings in their tails. Men worked over them. Cargo cranes rolled and rumbled, and the lights blazed. And the ships lay, cold, lofty, soulless, enduring the probing of experts into their sensitive electronic brains because they must, but obedient to nothing and answering no master but the invisible impulses of beam and power.

Above all else, Kirby hated the ships.

He was older than Wilson. He could remember Kahora Port as it had been when the rockets roared and thundered across it. He could remember the barrooms that were

around it, crowded with men from every world, speaking a thousand tongues. He could remember the spacemen's talk, and how some of them were already chafing at the barrier of Pluto's orbit, finding the System too small for them and looking hungrily at the stars beyond.

He could remember. He was a rocket man. He had seen every port in the System, or most of them, before he was twenty, and at twenty-six he had his master's ticket and was waiting for a ship. He had hated the dark robots then, because some day they were going to be a threat to trade. After their initial cost, a manned rocket couldn't compete with them. But that threat seemed a long way off.

He had his master's ticket, and presently he would have a ship, and by the time the robots got themselves established, the way would be open to the stars and a whole new era would begin.

And Kirby, hating in the shadow of the sandstone pillar, thought, "But it didn't begin, the old eras caught up to us first. The wars, the booms, the busts. One war, one bust too many."

And there were no more men in space.

Wilson shuffled his feet in the blowing dust. The stolen things were weighing heavy in his pocket, and he had still to face his wife. He said, "Let's go."

Kirby looked at the dark ships. "It was the women did it," he said slowly. "Oh, some of them wore pants and shaved every day, but it was the women all the same. They wanted what women always want, peace, security, everything fixed and neat and never changing, nobody taking any risks. You can't blame them, I suppose. They'd had a hard time of it, but . . ."

Acts, Acts, Acts! Trade Stabilization. Population Stabilization. Crop Stabilization. The busy minds of the Government working. Take the manned ships out of space, and there can't be any trade wars, any other kinds of wars. The worlds can't get at each other to fight. Stop expansion outward to the stars and there can't be any more economic upsets, any more expensive conquests, any more explosive rivalry between groups. Stabilize. Regulate. Control. Liberty is apt to be uncomfortable, let's be secure instead. The dark ships of the Government will police the Solar System. The Peace of Earth be with you!

"Inventories," said Kirby bitterly. "Do you know how many millions of inventories I've made out in that stinking Parts department?" Suddenly he laughed. "I wonder if they'll ever know how much I managed to hook out of those inventories?"

"Look," said Wilson. "Please. Let's get out of here."

Kirby shrugged and followed him. The fliers were not far away, small competent descendants of the helicopter, designed for family use like the old-fashioned automobile, and just as planet-bound. Kirby's and Wilson's were parked together. Wilson opened the door, but he didn't get in. A sudden reluctance seemed to have overtaken him.

"I thought you were in a hurry," Kirby said.

"Yeah. Damn it, Kirby, what am I going to tell her?"

"The truth."

"Oh, lord. She'll—I don't know what she'll do."

"All over Mars men are having the same trouble. Bull it through. If she screams too loud, smack her. She won't die of it."

Wilson said sourly, "It's easy for you to talk. You're a widower."

"I've got my own troubles."

"But it isn't—well, I suppose you have. But the kids, Kirby. That's the thing. That's what she'll really blow her top about."

"Listen, Wils. You knew you were going to have to do this from the beginning. It's tough on everybody, but it's too late to back out now. You believe in what you're doing, don't you?"

"Sure. Yes. But . . ."

"Then go ahead. Maybe your wife will even come around to agreeing with you some time."

Wilson said, "Ha!" very savagely. He climbed into his flier and slammed the door. Kirby stepped back. The rotors started to whir and then the small craft lifted straight up and skidded away toward the suburbs of Kahora. Kirby smiled crookedly and shook his head. He got into his own flier and took off. It ran smoothly by itself on autopilot, and he occupied his time by removing carefully from his pockets several

dozen transistors he had just stolen from the government and placing them in a hidden compartment of his own designing. By the time he was finished, the blazing dome of Kahora stood like a crystal wall on his left, showing through it a distorted vision of pastel buildings and gardens of many colors. Kirby glanced at it once. It had always seemed to him a soft, smothering place where everything, including the people, was effeminized and artificial. Like most of the resettled population, he lived outside the dome.

The suburbs were as pleasant as planning and effort could make them. Built long and low of the native clay, the houses suited the landscape and the climate. Native desert growths filled out the dry gardens. They were not lovely, but they had an exotic charm of their own, much like the Earthly cactus and the Joshua tree. Kirby had not minded the place itself, only the law that required him to live there and forbade him to leave for any length of time this particular area of Mars.

The populations of the Solar System had been carefully figured to the last decimal point and portioned out among the planets according to food- and employment-potentials, so that nowhere was there a scarcity or an overplus, and nobody's individual whim was allowed to upset the balance. If you wanted to change your residence from on sector or one world to another, the red tape involved was so colossal that men had been known to die of old age while waiting for a permit.

The women of the settlement toiled and wailed and nagged unceasingly to move into Kahora proper, under the dome. It was a matter of social prestige even more than of comfort. Kirby remembered that when his wife had succumbed to a mutant virus that swept the colony, his first feeling had been relief that he would no longer have to hear about Kahora. He thought again of Wilson, and pitied him. Trying to explain one's obvious lunacy to an irate woman was no easy task.

To Shari he would not have to explain. He would have only to say good-bye. Kirby stopped feeling sorry for Wilson.

He did not turn toward the street of bungalows where he still kept a pretense of residence. He went straight on over the low ridge behind the suburb to the Martian town that sprawled on the other side, the very ancient town that was the original Kahora. It was not so large as it had been, showing wide abandoned fringes that crumbled slowly away into nothingness. The ruins of the King City, the old battlemented stronghold of the rulers, stood up dark and lonely against the racing moons, and at its buttressed feet there curved the deep-gouged bed of a navigable river, dry and choked with dust. Kirby set his flier down beside a flat-roofed house on a winding narrow street, and went inside.

She was waiting for him. He had never come here in all these years that she had not been waiting for him, no matter what the hour. But tonight she was not smiling. Tonight she was not as she had ever been, and her eyes, the color of smoky topaz set a little obliquely in a high-boned face, held a look that he had never seen before, a look that did not come into the eyes of the Earth women, a fey look, wild and sombre. It made him shiver, and he started to speak, to ask her the reason for her strangeness, but she came to him swiftly and said, in the old High Martian,

"Beloved, there is danger, close behind you!"

Kirby's heart began to pound again. He reached out and caught her, almost roughly, her strong slim shoulder under his hand. "Danger, Shari? What do you mean, danger?" He paused, and then he added angrily, "What's this damned coverall you've got on? You look like the devil."

"I am going with you."

Kirby's jaw relaxed and his eyes widened. He had told her nothing. No word had ever been said between them. And yet she—"Shari, you're talking nonsense. What's the matter with you?"

"You came tonight to say good-bye."

"Who's been talking to you, Shari? Who's been telling . . ."

"Kirby, beloved, I am Martian. I have no need for talk. The other men will force their wives to go with them because they must, but I am not your wife."

"You are. Never say that."

"But only by the custom of my people. And so you were going to leave me behind."

A fear was coming over Kirby now. He turned away from her because her eyes frightened him with the wisdom that was in them, and he said desperately, "You don't know where I'm going. You don't know what the chances are, you don't realize—"

"You are going a great distance, Kirby. Farther than men have ever gone before. I know. And if you were going farther still, I would go with you."

She had a bundle packed. He saw it, neatly rolled and tied with cords, and it was a small thing, not much to carry away into the dark beyond. He looked around suddenly at the room he knew so well, the beautiful ancient things, the priceless carpet worn thin as silk but with nothing of its brightness lost, the wide couch and the low tables carved from woods that had not grown on Mars for millenniums, the little familiar things. He said, "How long have you lived here in this house, you and your family before you?"

She smiled. "What is time on Mars? Besides, I am the last. What matter if I lose it now, or in a little while?" She put something into his hand. "It is a gun, Kirby. You will have to use it."

He stared at the unfamiliar thing, unfamiliar because it had been so many years since he had seen one, and then he looked at her sharply. "You were talking about danger."

She nodded toward the window place, where the shutters were open to the moonlight. "Listen, and you will hear it coming."

II

THERE was a thrumming in the sky. "Fliers," Kirby said. "Two of them."

Shari picked up her bundle. "We can be away in yours before they reach here."

"No. They'd have us smack on in their radarscopes, and I don't dare lead them—" He didn't finish what he was about to say. Suddenly he shoved the gun out of sight under his loose shirt and grabbed Shari's bundle. "Peel off that coverall," he said. "Quick." There were cushions and bright silks on the couch. He hid the bundle among them and sprawled out on top of it, a man at ease, a man without a care in the world. Shari's ugly garment vanished also among the silks. By the time the fliers droned down to a landing outside she looked as she always did, a skirt-like wrapping of pale green girdled around her hips, her breasts bare after the Martian fashion, with a collar of hammered metal plaques above them. "Fix us a drink," said Kirby, and she bent over a low table, saying softly,

"These are men from the Port, with your brother that is not of blood but of the law."

"Marsh," said Kirby, and his eyes narrowed. He said a brief malediction. Then he asked Shari, "Have you always had this —gift?" He tapped his forehead. "I mean, all these years you could read my mind, and I never knew it?"

She smiled. "I never used it, except to tell me when you were coming. A Martian man could guard his mind, but not you. And I never told you of it because—it might have made you uncomfortable."

Kirby shook his head. "A telepath. I'll be damned. I knew Martians were supposed to have some queer powers, but I never dreamed—"

"Not all of us, Kirby, and the effort is too great to waste it on trivialities. Already my head aches." She put the tall glass in his hand and then she kissed him briefly, fiercely, and whispered, "Be careful! And now I'll let them in."

The knocking on the door had just begun. Shari opened it, and three men came in. Two of them were government agents assigned to Port Security, and Kirby reckoned that there must be two more outside, searching his own flier. The third man was his brother-in-law. He was also Divisional Superintendent, and Kirby's superior.

Kirby sat up indignantly. "What the devil are you doing here?" he demanded. "Can't a man have any privacy?"

"I would have spoken to you at your home," said Marsh, "but of course you weren't there." He looked around the room slowly, letting his gaze slide over Shari as though she were not there. He was a tall man. He had never been muscular, and though he was not fat there were paddings of soft flesh on his cheeks and belly. His features were narrow and pronounced—very like the features of Kirby's dead wife—and his attitude, like hers, was one of deep

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disapproval of practically everything.

Kirby asked, "What did you have to say that couldn't be said during working hours?"

"You're under arrest."

Kirby sprang up. "Listen, a citizen still has some rights under this fine benevolent government. You'll have to do better than that."

One of the government men stepped forward, pulling a paper out of his pocket. "Warrant," he said. "You're charged with a long lot of words, but it boils down to theft of government property, corruption of government employees, and suspicion of sabotage. That enough?"

"I guess so," said Kirby, "except that Marsh is crazy if he thinks he can pin it on me. Where's your evidence, Marsh? You can't put me in prison just because you hate my guts."

"Set your mind at rest. I have what evidence I need. But the thefts are not the important part, Kirby. It's what you're doing with the things. There's no market for them, you can't sell them anywhere—there must be another reason. I have an idea what it is, but I want you to tell me."

"You do," said Kirby, and smiled.

Marsh's thin mouth grew thinner. "I know what you're up to, whether you tell me or not, and you know what the penalty is." He came forward a little. "I'm trying to help you, not for your sake but because you were my sister's husband, and I don't want her name involved in criminal proceedings. If you'll make a full confession, now, with the names of all other persons connected with this business, I'll withdraw my charges against you. I'll even go so far as to say that you were acting for me."

Kirby glanced at the government men. "With those two boys hanging over your shoulder? You never were very smart."

"They'll go along with me."

The government men nodded. Kirby laughed. "That important, is it? Well, I'm sorry. I don't know anything. I don't even know what you're talking about."

The two men who had remained outside to search Kirby's flier came in. One of them shook his head and said, "Nothing in it." Kirby took a long drink from the glass he still held in his hand and put it down. "Marsh," he said, "don't you think you're letting your dislike for me carry you a little too far?"

"I don't dislike you. I'm only warning you, for your own good, to talk."

"OH, BUT you do," said Kirby, moving a little to the right. "You always thought your sister was much too good for me. You know something, Marsh? Your sister was a mess. She was selfish and hen-brained and trouble-making, and Mars was a better place when she left it." Underneath his words his mind was signalling frantically to Shari, "Now! Now! Can you do something to distract them?" It seemed a lunatic thing to depend on telepathy, but—

Marsh was genuinely shocked. He stared at Kirby for a moment, and then his face began to darken. He said, "You have no right to speak that way." He looked at Shari. "Especially after—" He could not bring himself to say the words. Then he snapped, "You might at least have married her!"

"I did," said Kirby. "Her people do not require laws to force them to be faithful. They assume that where there is love there is marriage, and where there is not the whole thing had better be forgotten. We do very well."

"In that case," Marsh said acidly, "we had better arrest her too, as an accessory." He turned to the government men. "He's going to be stubborn, and we can't afford stubbornness now. Even a few hours of stalling on Kirby's part might be enough to let the ship take off without him."

Kirby's nerves contracted with a stabbing pain. It was no surprise to him that Marsh had guessed the truth, but he hated to hear the bald, flat mention of a thing that had been so painfully, so lovingly hidden for so long. Shari said softly, in the ceremonial High Martian that few Earthmen understood, "It is only a guess. And now I am going to speak."

One of the government men got out a flat case with a syringe in it. "I figured we'd have to loosen his tongue," he said laconically, and Kirby shivered. The truth-drugs developed since the days of scopolamine were very good. Too good. They worked.

Why the hell didn't Shari do something?

She did. She spoke suddenly and clearly in English, which she knew perfectly but almost never used. She spoke to Marsh, and her eyes were fixed on his with that queer fey look that seemed to strip his mind down naked. Kirby saw him trying to turn away from it, but he couldn't, it held him trapped. Shari said, "It is not because of your dead sister that you hate Kirby. You hate him because you are not a man."

A curious change came over Marsh's face, slight at first, so slight that Kirby hardly noticed it. He started to say something, but Shari's clear voice drowned him out.

"You hate all those who love and marry, because you can find no pleasure in it. You hate courage, because you have none yourself. You are eaten up with hatred and poisoned with envy, but you are not even wicked. You are nothing."

Marsh's face had crumbled and become somehow both pitiful and repulsive. He said to Shari, "You're a liar, a filthy liar. I'm married. I have children. I—"

Shari said relentlessly, "You are not a man."

Marsh gave back a step. It seemed that he wanted desperately to evade Shari's pitiless gaze that saw everything he had hidden inside himself. He made a small whimpering sound, turning his head from side to side. The government men were all looking at Marsh now, and not at Kirby. One of them snickered, and Marsh winced, drawing back his lips in the grimace of a child about to cry. Kirby took his eyes away from Marsh. He was inexpressibly shocked. He had always had a healthy detestation for his brother-in-law, but he wished that Shari had not done this. Then the reason for her doing it came back to him, and he pulled the gun from underneath his shirt.

"All right," he said. "Everybody stand still. Get your hands up."

Immediately he was the center of attention. For a second or two nobody did move, stricken with astonishment at the sight of the gun. They had never dreamed that he might be armed. Nobody was armed any more. It was unheard of. Even the government police carried only shockers that stunned but did not kill. Kirby was grateful to whatever male relative of Shari's it had been who buried this forbidden relic of the bad old days in the Martian city of Kahora.

"It shoots bullets," he said, so that they should all understand. "It was built to be lethal, not polite, and my marksmanship is very rusty. I couldn't guarantee just to cripple you. Starting one by one from the left, will you move away from the door? Shari, close the shutters."

Uncertainly, looking at each other as men do who are momentarily at a loss and hoping for an example from somebody else, Marsh and the Government men began to move. Kirby heard the shutters bang, and then Shari came up beside him. The man with the drug-case was still holding it in his upraised hand. Kirby said, "You. Let it drop."

Shari cried, "He'll throw it."

Kirby ducked. The hard case flashed past his head. The man reached fast for the shocker that was holstered under his armpit. Kirby fired. The gun made a very loud noise. The man doubled up and sat down on the floor. Kirby saw movement among the others. He fired again, and missed, but the bullet whined close between two heads, and the movement stopped. Marsh had turned an ashen gray. He leaned against the wall, not saying anything, waiting to be sick. Kirby did not feel so well himself. He kept glancing at the man who was rocking back and forth over his knees and sobbing.

"He is not dying," Shari said, answering his thought. "It is only that he does not care for pain. Keep them still while I bind them."

THEY were ready to be still now. Shari laughed. "They do not love the government enough to die for it. They are all thinking that they have done their best, and now it is up to others." Her hands worked swiftly. Suddenly she stopped. "Kirby, they are thinking that the R-3 ships will track you down and destroy you and all the others."

"Go ahead, tie them up." Kirby went and stuck the muzzle of the gun close to Marsh's face. "Have the R-3's been alerted?"

"Yes. You can't escape them, Kirby. They'll find your ship, they'll smash it up, they'll smash you and all the others, and there won't be any mercy . . ."

He was screaming like a woman. Kirby hit him across the mouth, not out of vengefulness but to stop the ugly noise. Shari said quietly, "He lies. It is done now, Kirby. Come."

She found her bundle and her coverall, bunching them together under her arm. Kirby went with her out the door, shutting it carefully behind them. The shots had not attracted any crowd. He had not thought they would. The Martians had a way of letting Earthmen handle their own troubles without interference.

Kirby walked fast toward the fliers. "What about the R-3's, Shari? Could you read his mind?"

"The authorities are waiting at the port. They thought there would be no trouble about handling you, but they knew that it might take a little time if the drugs had to be used. They know you're here, of course—Marsh told them when he landed."

"Yeah. We have some leeway, then?"

"Until at the port they begin to wonder why no further report has been made." She put her hand to her head and pressed it. "I wish I were better at this. My brain is cracking open."

Kirby hesitated, looking at the three craft and scowling. Then he thrust Shari into his own and said, "I'll be back in a second. Maybe I can stall 'em a while longer."

His own communicator would not operate on the official UHF band, which was closed to civilians. He climbed into one of the other fliers and bent over the radio. Then he hesitated again, overcome by a sudden desire to let well enough alone. For precious seconds he stood there fingering the switch, trying to make up his mind. "Bull by the horns," he muttered at last. He was afraid of the R-3's. Any risk was worthwhile if it held them back a little longer. He began to search his pockets. "Damn it, I never have a handkerchief. Oh, well, this'll do." He hauled out his shirttail and wrapped it over his mouth. Then he opened the switch and spoke, pitching his voice a bit high. "Port Security. This is Marsh, calling Port—"

"Receiving you. What's going on?"

Kirby's voice cracked from sheer nervousness, giving an impression of excitement he could not have counterfeited. "Everything's fine. Kirby put up more resistance than we looked for, but he's under the drugs now and as soon as they take effect we'll have the whole story."

"Good. What about the woman?"

Kirby sniffed. "You know her kind. I'm going back in the house now—I don't want to miss anything. We'll keep you posted."

"Right. Remember, we want the information as soon as you get it. We're ready to act as soon as we have anything to go on."

Kirby mumbled something about patience and it wouldn't be long now. Port Security signed off. Kirby closed the switch, remembering some big stones that lay on the ground outside. He got one and went to work with it, in a violent hurry. When he was through both official communicators and both flight control panels were out of commission. If Marsh and the others should get free it would not do them any immediate good.

Shari was waiting quietly. She said nothing while he lifted off and sent his flier rushing at full power along an oblique course that led out over the desert. She seemed very tired, and there were lines of pain around her mouth. Kirby leaned over and kissed her.

"You can rest now. You've saved us this time."

She shook her head and sighed. "I'll have to. My mind is tired. Until I've slept it will be useless."

With more control over her nerves than Kirby could have mustered, she slid down in the padded seat and slept, almost at once. He looked at her. Since the decision had been hers, unsought and unsuggested, he was glad she had come. She was too much a part of him to be left behind now, and there was another reason, too. The whole venture had shifted abruptly into a sharper focus. He was savagely determined that it had to succeed, all the way, because nothing must happen to Shari.

The desert reeled away beneath them, mile on empty mile, with nothing to break its desolation but an occasional wandering dust-devil. The moons sank out of sight. Once Kirby saw in the distance the black line of a canal with a town beside it, pricked out with a scattering of torches. The Earth-

man's civilization did not reach this far into the heart of Mars. There was only timelessness out here, and a long slow dying. The stars burned magnificently overhead in the thin dry air. Kirby studied them with a kind of intimacy. He was afraid, and yet he felt as he had not felt in years, not since he was a green kid stepping away from Earth for the first time, outbound for strange new worlds.

He pushed the flier to the limit of its speed, and it was fast, but there was not time enough given to him, and he knew that there would not be. He had still a long way to go when the Urgent signal from his own communicator shrilled through the cockpit. A second or two later a man's harsh voice called out his own name, and added, "Acknowledge at once!"

Kirby did not acknowledge. There was nothing he wanted to say, and he was not going to oblige them with a carrier wave so they could fix his position. He waited.

"This is your last warning, Kirby. Your only chance is to obey instructions immediately. The R-3's have been sent out."

III

SHARI had wakened. She straightened up and looked at Kirby. "Shall we be able to make it?"

"I don't know. Depends on how long it takes the R-3's to locate us. They'll have to hunt, and there's a lot of desert around Kahora. On the other hand, they're fast. A hell of a lot faster than we are."

He looked around apprehensively, but there was no sign of anything yet in the sky, nor did his radarscope show any warning pip. Shari put her hand over on top of his.

"I think perhaps luck will be with us," she said. "You're afraid now, but it is mostly for me. Don't be. Whatever happens, *it could not have been any other way.*"

He took her hand and squeezed it savagely. "I'll see to it nothing does happen. Damn it, this desert always did seem to go on forever. Won't those blasted mountains ever show?"

It seemed to Kirby that the flier barely moved. His heart thumped painfully, and every nerve-end was awake and leaping. He hunched over the controls, trying to urge the small craft forward as one does a horse, with his own body. And then Shari said a surprising thing. She said, "For the first time since I have known you, you are happy."

"Happy!" he said. He laughed.

"But you are. I think it's because for the first time you feel free. The net is broken. You may die, but you will not again be a prisoner."

He grunted. "I wouldn't know. Right now I don't feel anything at all but scared." Ahead of him, out of the gloom, there lifted a jagged wall—not high, because the ceaseless tramping of the centuries had worn away the soil, and then the softer rock, and then the hard rock, grinding them into powdery dust to roll away with the wind, so that only a rag and a bone of a mountain chain was left. But it was the thing Kirby was looking for. He shouted suddenly, and on the heels of his exultance like a jeering echo came the first monotonous peet-peet-peet from the radarscope, and a bright little pip showed up at the edge of the screen.

"The mountains are close," said Shari. "So's the R-3. And look at it come!"

The bright pip moved like a shooting star across the screen. The intensity of the single note increased rapidly. Kirby groaned. The gnawed and ancient peaks were not ahead of him now, but underneath, and the place he wanted to get to was so agonizingly near at hand—

His communicator clamored at him suddenly. It was the port Control Center, where the men with the dials and the indicators and the screens and the infinite numbers of gadgets controlled the R-ships, guiding them, receiving data from them, making the decisions and the final pushings of the ultimate buttons.

"You're centered, Kirby. You have ten seconds before the proximity trip releases the first missile—unless we stop it. You're being given one more chance. Acknowledge! One—two—three—four—"

Kirby glanced aside at Shari. Then he reached out fast and clicked over the switch. "Kirby acknowledging! This is Kirby—hold your fire!"

"All right. Here's the deal. We want the

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star-ship, and we want it now, right away, fast. We know you're close to it. Lead on, and we'll smash it up instead of you."

"What happens to me afterward?" asked Kirby sullenly.

"You'll be alive. So will the person you have with you. You haven't anything to lose, and you know we'll get the star-ship anyway."

"Then why make deals with me?"

"We'd rather get it on the ground, before there's even an attempt at taking off. Psychological reasons."

Kirby glared at the passing peaks beneath him, lines drawn deep between his brows. At last he said heavily, "It's in a cleft of the sea-bottom, about seventy miles ahead."

"Good. We thought you'd see reason. As soon as the R-3 picks it up visually we'll notify you to turn around and come home."

"All right." Kirby's voice rose to a sharper edge. "I just want you to know that I'm not giving up for myself, I'd just as soon get blown to hell as live like a kept woman any longer. But you're right, I've got somebody with me."

"It all adds up to the same thing. Go ahead, Kirby, but be very careful. That proximity trip is all ready to go the minute anything looks wrong."

"Don't get impatient," Kirby snarled. "I'm right on course. Seventy miles."

"We're patient people. And leave your communicator open."

Kirby turned to Shari. She was leaning toward him, toward the microphone. Her eyes were very bright. Abruptly, in a shrill loud tone that was not like her usual voice at all, she began to upbraid him, calling him a coward, a weakling, an old woman, and going on from there in Low Martian to language he would not have thought she knew. He answered her back, sulkily at first and then more and more angrily, until they were shouting at each other and the narrow confines of the cabin rang with it. Faintly from the speaker Kirby could hear the man at Control Center laughing. Moving as silently as he could he slid out of the seat and opened his secret hiding place and shifted the precious transistors into his pockets. The night beyond the cabin windows showed intensely dark. Shari's voice pealed on, rising to a fishwifely frenzy. He roared back at her, using out of three vocabularies every dirty word he could lay his tongue to, and handed her her rolled-up bundle. Then he reached over and shoved a lever on the panel. The flier lurched. A volley of deafening explosions broke out and the starboard wing rotor went crazy. Shari screamed, "Do something, you fool, you idiot! We're going to crash . . ."

Kirby yelled into the microphone, "Hold back your damn robot, I've got to slow down!"

"What's wrong?"

"Are you deaf or something? I've been pushing this crate too hard and she's hot and she's jammed." Kirby fought the controls, grinning, the sweat pouring down his face. He nodded to Shari. Under cover of the racket the motor was making she opened the cockpit door, never once pausing in her maniacal shrieks. "I'm slowing down," Kirby told Control Center. "Don't run over me. Damn you, Shari, shut up!" He brought his palms together hard with a cracking sound. She let out one last yip and was quiet, crouching by the open door, the wind whipping her silken skirt around her legs.

Control Center said, "We're synchronizing speed. Can you clear your motor?"

KIRBY worked the lever. The motor choked, roared for a minute into life, and then choked again. There were further explosions. He throttled down some more and made another adjustment. The motor coughed and began to chug along quite normally. Kirby said, "Yeah. But I'll have to take it easy and let her cool. There's no hurry anyway." The worn eroded heap of mountain below was gashed with shallow valleys, welling now with darkness. Kirby had lost altitude along with speed. The ridges and plateaus that walled the valleys in were not too far below, not much farther than a man could jump if he wasn't afraid to take a chance.

"Listen, Kirby," said the voice from Control Center grimly, "if that ship takes off before we reach it, the deal's no good. You understand that."

"They won't take off without me, not if they can help it."

"Why are you so important?"

"You don't realize what a rare commodity I am." Kirby was very still now, very tense. His eyes moved sharply from the instrument panel to the black night ahead, and then back again. The flier was going by itself now on autopilot. His right hand was raised, and Shari watched it, crouching by the open door. Kirby said to the microphone, "In this day and age, an experienced spaceman with a master's rating who's still young enough to move without creaking is worth his weight in diamonds to the right people. You bet I'm important."

A dim plateau slid out of the darkness, close underneath. Kirby counted under his breath, and then his upraised hand flashed down. Before the gesture was finished, Shari jumped.

"Is that why you got into this, Kirby—to be important, to be a spaceman again?"

"Oh, hell," said Kirby, "what difference does it make now? All I wind up being is a Judas goat, and inside of an hour the ship will be a pile of junk. Just be content with what you've got and don't worry about motives." He made a dial setting on the autopilot. "Another five minutes and I can increase speed again, if that'll make you any happier."

"Kirby . . ."

"Oh, shut up. This is bad enough without having to yak about it."

"Okay, if that's the way you want it."

Silence.

Kirby rose and crept to the door and jumped.

He had waited almost too long. The plateau was not wide, and he hit so close to the drop-off that he thought he was going to go over. He lay flat on the rock, jarred to his back teeth by the brief fall, and watched his flier buzzing purposefully away on its course. The small plateau was the last jut of the mountains. Here they fell away into a great deep gulf that had held an inland sea as big as the Caspian, in the days before Mars began to die.

He lay still, watching, and presently above him a shadow passed. It passed without sound not twenty feet over his head, as a shark passes over a swimmer in deep water, dark, unhurried, huge, and potent with a devouring fury. The starlight touched its tapering flanks with a cold pale glimmer and brought to the lensed "eyes" on its forward surface an eerie glint of life. Kirby knew that those eyes were no more than electronic cameras, and that they were blinded by the dark—when they needed to "see" the powerful floodlights would click on and give them day, but they were not looking for anything yet. Even so, he shrank closer to the rock, fighting off a horrid conviction that this unnatural child of the guided missile and the pilotless plane was a living thing, sentient, all powerful and eager to slay.

It went on, leaving only a whisper of air behind it, following the flier. It pleased Kirby to think of the very small robot innocently betraying its savage cousin. He got up off the rock, calling for Shari, and a man's voice spoke to him out of the darkness.

"Kirby! Kirby, is that you?"

"Yeah." He made out a nervous shadow and went toward it, recognizing it as Hockley, a power-installation technician from a secondary spaceport over on the other side of Mars. Hockley was crouching beside a heap of carefully arranged stones that concealed a field telephone, permanent equipment on this lookout post, and somebody was talking over the phone in a way that verged on the hysterical, but Hockley was paying no attention to it. He was staring after the dark ship.

Kirby took the phone. He spoke into it briefly, giving the exact coordinates of the course being taken by the flier and the R-3. Then he said, "Is everybody accounted for?"

The voice on the other end said, "Now that you're here. You're late."

"Get 'em all strapped in. We're coming down."

"Make it fast!"

Kirby put the phone away and shouted again for Shari. She had come up quietly while he talked and was standing beside him, waiting. They started off, the three of them, down the broken, tumbled path that twisted to the foot of the long slope. Both men had made the trip many times before. Sliding and skidding on the steep stretches, raising a trail of fine dust, they went down the drop at a speed that was not quite reckless, alternately helping Shari

On both sides of the path there stretched curious mounds and heaps of stone, a few of them still betraying a rectangular shape. Looking at them, Shari said abruptly, "This was once a city."

Kirby nodded. "It was a port, until the sea dried up and left it." He stopped suddenly, digging his heels in the dust. Out over the sea-bottom a tiny nova had burst and died.

"That," said Kirby, "was my flier. Control Center is not so dumb as I had hoped."

Hockley said something between a curse and a prayer. "It'll come back now, looking for us."

A SHAFT of light, distant but blinding bright, appeared like a pillar upon the desert. It moved. Hockley groaned and flung himself on down the path. Kirby was right on his heels.

They passed the harbor quays, huge broken monoliths worn round and shapeless, still lying dutifully along the edges of a deep gorge that had once been filled with blue water but was now only a naked gash in the rock. There was a way down the cliff, a way like a broad stair. Men had made it, men who had still followed the shrinking sea. Fishermen, probably, climbing down to their boats. The mouths of great caverns yawned beside it, holes gnawed out of the cliff in ages gone by the action of the water. The two men and woman ran, their feet clattering on the stone. The bright pillar moved swiftly over the sea-bottom, light for the R-3's searching "eyes." In the darkness on the floor of the dry harbor there was hurried movement, and a sound of voices, and a glinting of the cold stars off of colder metal.

Hockley said, "I wish we had more of those. I wish we had a thousand."

"One ought to be enough."

There was a flash, a hiss, and a nerve-chilling whine that vanished away almost before it was heard. Kirby stopped running, holding tight to Shari's hand. Hockley stopped. They stood motionless. Seconds crawled by like years, and nothing happened. Hockley whispered, "They missed . . ."

"They couludn't. They had the course. Besides, those babies can find their own target, that's what they're built for, to intercept . . ."

A second nova, vastly larger, flared and fell, and after an interval came the shock-wave and the noise. Kirby laughed.

"Control Center wasn't expecting that. Now we go!"

They half fell the rest of the short way to the bottom. A little group of men received them. The portable rack from which they had launched the interceptor missile had already been shoved aside, out of the way. All together they plunged into a vast lopsided opening in the cliff as high as two cathedrals. There were lights in there, carefully shaded so that no gleam reached outside. There were numerous fliers, parked together in a bay of the cavern. Around the walls there were forges and machine tools, collected painfully piece by piece over the years, improvised, patched together. There was the litter of much working. There was a ship.

Shari uttered a small cry of surprise. "But it's so ugly!"

"What did you expect?" snapped Kirby. "An ex-tramp freighter . . ."

She laughed. "I'm sorry. But in your mind its image has been clothed with such beauty!"

They stumbled up the gangplank, crowding the narrow lock that had over its inner door in faded letters, LUCY B. DAVENPORT, TERRA. Inside there was pandemonium. Men were shouting. An uproar of women's voices filled all the spaces within the hull, punctuated by the bawlings of children. The outer door of the lock clanged shut. Kirby gave Shari's hand a final squeeze and left her to shift for herself. He, too, began to shout, running forward along the corridor. Somebody heard him and got hold of the intercom, ordering everyone to shut up and prepare for take-off. Nobody seemed to pay much attention. It still sounded to Kirby like riots going on all over the ship. He clattered up the ladder into the bridge and slammed the door behind him. It was quieter. "Get the hell out of there, Pop," he said to the old man who was sitting in the pilot's chair.

Pop Barstow grinned at him. "I was hoping you wouldn't show up, so's I could take the old Ark off myself." He slid into

the co-pilot's place and laid the webbing over his lank middle. Kirby said grimly, "You may get your chance yet. Give 'em the siren." He punched the firing keys. A great roaring filled the cavern and the deck beneath him leaped a little. The siren began to wail. The ship's bow-light came on, outlining the cavern's mouth in a hard white brilliante. Sitting stiff and quivering in the pilot's chair, Kirby began to nurse the *Lucy Davenport* forward along the way that had been prepared for her. It had been a long time since he held a ship under his hands. Too long. He was scared. Maybe he'd lost his touch. Maybe he couldn't do it any more. Maybe he'd crash her, with all those screaming women and kids. . . . With Shari.

"Butterflies?" asked Barstow.

Kirby shook his head. "Sea gulls."

"You're too young, Kirby. Let me have her."

Kirby laughed. They were clear of the cavern now—almost. A little way more. His insides felt as though they were caught in a vise. They hurt.

Shaw, the radarman, said suddenly, "I'm picking up something." From the back of the bridgeroom where he bent over the 'scope there came the monotonous, nerve-clawing bleat of the signal, still faint but growing louder.

"More R-3's," said Barstow. "Well, young Kirby, are you going to let 'em catch us?"

They were clear now. Kirby shut his jaws together and leaned forward over the control bank. The belly jets cut in with a howl and a burst of flame. The ship rose up enormously as though on a column of fire, and the stern jets opened wide to full power. The *Lucy B. Davenport* pointed her nose to the black sky and went up screaming, leaving behind her a roll of apocalyptic thunder. Almost before Kirby knew it they were in silence and open space, and the radarscope was blank.

Pop Barstow reached solemnly inside his shirt and came out with a bottle. He drank and passed it to Kirby, who needed it.

"Well," said Barstow, "so far, so good. We made it."

Kirby gasped and ran his hand over his mouth, passing the bottle back. He looked out through the bow port. The landing light was off, and there was space, where he had lived once until he was prisoned on a planet. It had not changed. The stars burned just as bright, and the gulfs between them were as deep and dark and cold. He shivered, a shallow twitching of the skin. He was a stranger here now, an intruder. Space no longer belonged to men. It was the kingdom of the dark ships, of which the R-3's had been only the small foretaste.

At her present desperate rate of acceleration, the *Lucy Davenport* would be clear of the System and beyond the range of the interplanetary control stations before even the Mars-based ships could catch her. They had timed their take-off very carefully for that. From then on there was nothing between them and their destination but space —4.3 light-years of it.

But even in the immensity of interstellar space there was no safety. Here, too, the dark ships had outstripped man. It was only a question of time. . . .

"Yeah," said Kirby heavily, "we made it. Now all we have to do is wait, and wonder every second if the R-ships can run us down."

IV

THE word went out from Mars: *There are men in space again.*

Secretly and stealthily that word went, on the tight Government beams, but it was heard and repeated. Inward from Mars it traveled, across Earth and Venus and into the sun-bitten, frost-wracked valleys of Mercury. Outward from Mars it traveled, to the lunar colonies of Jupiter and Saturn, to the nighted mining-camps of the worlds beyond. *There are men in space again!*

Human mind and muscle had challenged the dark ships, and the barriers that had been so strong were broken, the frontiers that had been closed were open, and a thing had been done so splendid and insane and terrifying that it struck the mass consciousness with the impact of a bomb. There was no longer any point in feigning secrecy. The news services broadcast the story, training expressive cameras on the comfortable houses left vacant and forlorn, the abandoned toys, the supper dishes still untouched on dusty tables.

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Neighbor women shook their heads for a System-wide audience, lamenting the tragic fate of those whose husbands and fathers had so forcibly betrayed them. Two prospective passengers who had fled screaming into the night, leaving their husbands to go starward alone, gave solemn interviews and received much sympathetic attention. To that portion of the population given to feeling intensely about things, the *Lucy B. Davenport* became a symbol.

To most she was the black shadow of reaction, the last resurgence of the bad old days. To some, chiefly the boys and the young men with dreams not quite stamped out of them yet, she was the bright single spark in a dreary monotone. If she made it, she would have started something. If she made it, she would have ended something, too—the absolute authority of the dark ships.

If she made it.

Here and there, scattered through the Solar System, certain men—other Kirbys and Wilsons and Pop Barstows—had a special interest in the outcome. The *Lucy B. Davenport* was not the only survivor of the Age of Rockets, cherished in the secrecy of waste places. It was not possible that she could have been. The law requiring the surrender and destruction of all manned ships was a challenge to the rebellious old Adam inherent in the human race. A few men actually succeeded in breaking it.

On Pluto there was activity. There was a base there for the heavily-shielded R-40's that carried the uranium ore from the mines. Behind it there were black mountains sheathed in ice, and all around it was a plain that glittered in the starlight, white with frozen air. The base itself was one vast sunken dome, for the ships and for the men that served them. But to one side was a second dome, and above it was a group of towers somewhat different from those of the base proper, squatter and more massive. This place had been used once. Since then it had lain quiet, its contents sheathed cocoon-like in protective webs.

Now men invaded it again, stripping away the sheathing, checking, testing, making delicate adjustments. And underneath the dome the giant dynamos awoke, and the solid granite of the plain was shaken.

On its massive launching truck, a long dark shape lay waiting.

Far out in the gulf that lies between Sol and Alpha Centauri, Kirby wished desperately that he had never been born. "Can't they shut up?" he demanded of Pop Barstow. "Don't they ever shut up?"

"Ain't the nature of the beast," said Pop, who had three wives. He added philosophically, "Have a drink."

Kirby swore. "How many bottles did you smuggle aboard? Anyway, that's not the answer. I don't mind them yakking. I don't even mind them screaming. It's what they're doing to the men. Rotting the hearts out of them, that's what they're doing! Making 'em more like rabbits every day. They—"

"You can't blame them too much," said Shari gently. She was curled up in a corner of the bench that ran around part of the bridge, looking tired, looking bored, looking infinitely, infuriatingly patient. "It wasn't their idea to come."

"I don't know why you want to defend them," said Kirby irritably, "after the way they've treated you." He knew she was right, but it only angered him more to know it. He turned to Pop Barstow. "They think Shari isn't decent. Can you beat that?"

Pop grinned. "You don't know the ladies very well, do you, young Kirby? It isn't her morals they care about, one way or the other. It's her looks. Ain't that so, Shari?"

She nodded, looked at Kirby, smiling. "Now you see why I haven't been angry with them."

Kirby rose. "I give up." He stood frowning a little absently in Shari's direction. Then he said, "You're still not sorry you came?"

"No."

"Don't you go back on me, that's all. I'd jump right out the window." He kissed her, and said, without joy, "Well, I suppose I better go down and talk to them."

"Luck," said Pop cynically. He had had three wives.

KIRBY went out and down the passage. One watch before the ark had reached the maximum acceleration her middle-aged bones could stand, and the stern rockets had been cut. She was running now on constant velocity, in absolute silence except when

one of the auxiliaries was cut in briefly by the automatic compensators to keep her dead on course, or by the sensor-field detector relays to avoid spatial debris. After the incessant roaring he had become used to, Kirby's own footsteps sounded unnaturally loud in the stillness. He didn't like it. It gave him a feeling of cessation, of not moving, when every nerve was screaming to make speed, speed, and more speed. He wished that somebody had perfected one of those interstellar drives they had talked about, and that he had it. Might as well wish for wings. Or luck. All he had was an elderly ship and conventional rockets, and it was going to be a long trip. Unless it was a very short one.

He went down a winding ladder to the cargo deck. It ceased to be silent. The main holds below were full of everything they had been able to latch onto and smuggle out in the fliers, added onto the original cargo the ark had been carrying when she went into hiding. But the cargo deck had been cleared of what light stuff was in it and refilled with women and kids.

Every one of them, Kirby thought, was yelling at full lungpower. Babies cried. Small children roared—in pleasure or pain, it was impossible to tell which. Half a dozen teen-aged girls giggled together in a corner. A boy the same age was shooting paper wads at them. Women moved here and there, doing things, doing nothing, or sat still on the improvised bunks, or smacked their young ones. There was a faint odor of cooking.

A network of cords ran overhead, with blankets and tarpaulins fixed to them, so that the separate families might have some privacy when they wanted it. Some of the cords were hung with diapers, and rows of little pants and shirts, and feminine undergarments. The husbands and fathers who were off duty and had no place else to go were scattered here and there, looking dismal, like men who have been beaten for a very long time. Wilson was among them. He sat humped over beside a bunk on which his wife lay in the attitude of an uncompromising corpse, staring straight up at the roof.

Kirby hesitated, trying to think if there wasn't something vital he had to see to in the bridgeroom. But it was too late. He was spotted. The riot began.

He had managed to avoid this so far. He and Shari, with Pop and what single men there were aboard, bunked in the officers' cabins on the bridge deck, and his duty had given him an excuse to ignore the requests forwarded to him from below to come down and be slain. For some reason the women seemed to have fastened on him as the arch-demon, probably because he made the actual flying possible, and because he was by circumstance placed in supreme authority as skipper of this reluctant star-ark. He climbed part way up the ladder again and roared for silence.

Wilson's wife got up off her bed and stalked through the crowd until she was directly below Kirby. The gabble of voices quieted somewhat, enough that he could hear her quite plainly.

"You don't have anything to say to us that we want to hear, Phil Kirby!" she said, snapping each separate word off with an audible click of her teeth. She wasn't at all bad looking. Kirby had always liked her. Now he had an almost uncontrollable urge to lay her over his knee and give her something to complain about.

She moved a little closer, showing the whites of her eyes. "All we want is to be taken home again. And if there was anybody but you fit to fly us home, we'd—we'd—" Words formed a hard lump in her throat and choked her. She moved forward again. "You got my Wils into this, you crazy good-for-nothing squaw-man! He'd never have done it if you . . ."

The flat of Kirby's hand shut off the rest of it. He had come down off the ladder and his face was perfectly white. Sally Wilson whimpered and put her fingers over her mouth, staring at him as though the sky had fallen.

Wilson moved forward, not angry but pretending he was angry because he had to, and said, "Here now, Kirby! Even if Sally was out of line, you can't—"

Kirby said quietly, "Shari is my wife. I'll have no such talk about her." He looked around the circle of faces. "Is that understood?" A pudding-faced girl in the back row started to say something, and he bellowed, "Shut up!" He glared at them all

impartially, and then turned again to Sally Wilson. "Why is it you women always think everybody but yourselves is a spineless moron without a will of his own, wide open to be led into anything? *I* got your Wils into this, did I? Here, you, Wilson! And Hockley, and Weiss—all you guys! Did I lead you into anything, or did you damn well get into this of your own free will?"

Wilson scuffed the toe of his boot on the deck, evading Kirby's eyes. "Aw," he said, "you know how—"

"Did you or didn't you?"

Wilson thrust out his lip like a rebellious small boy and said loudly, "Yes! Yes, I did. And so did all the rest of us."

A chorus of male voices added assent.

"Good," said Kirby. "Then that's settled. And—"

A VERY large young woman with an enormous pink child in her arms thrust herself in front of Kirby and said, "I don't care whose idea it was, it wasn't mine, and I want to go home." Quite suddenly she thrust the child at him. "Look at her," she demanded. "Look at that poor little innocent helpless baby. Can you stand there and tell me that you don't care what happens to her?"

The child, alarmed by the uproar, began to howl and kick Kirby in the stomach. The mother grabbed it back. "No, I can see you don't care. You don't care if we die on this horrible old ship, or get torn to pieces by wild animals on some world nobody ever heard of. It's men like you that made a mess out of everything before, and you'd do it again, you wouldn't care what happened to other people, just so you could satisfy your crazy whims."

She raised her voice another notch. "I want to go home. I demand to go home! We all demand to go home!"

Kirby waited until he could make himself heard again. Then he shook his head. "You women are funny. You all loved your husbands enough to start this journey with them, and now you want to turn back."

"We were forced to come! We—"

"No, you weren't. Not actually. You could have screamed for help and had your husbands put safely away in the Plutonian mines for life. But you didn't—you chose to come. Now it seems you're sorry you didn't have them sent to Pluto, so you could stay with your little curtains and your tea-sets and the pretty cruddies on the mantel, all the really important things."

Sally Wilson began to cry. "But we were all so happy where we were. Why did you have to do this? What more could you want that you didn't have?"

Kirby said soberly, "If you don't know, it wouldn't be any use to tell you." He looked at the children. They were quiet now, awed by the sound and fury, standing in little mobs and staring. "Maybe it was for them, more than anything. They ought to have a chance to grow up to be men and women, not just numbers on a big sheet of statistics. Besides," he added with sudden intensity, "it has to be now. Pretty soon there won't be anybody left who can handle a ship, and it'll be too late. People will sit in their dull comfortable little nests and stagnate and rot and get softer every year, and that'll be the end of us. You know the real thing that's being taken out of us? Youth. Kids are born and brought up already middle-aged. There aren't any horizons any more. Just comfort."

"I like comfort," said the large young woman defiantly.

"Well, you're fed three meals a day, there's a roof over your head and no rent to pay, so why worry? Listen, we've got a long voyage ahead of us. Let's not make it any tougher on ourselves."

The large young woman snorted. "I'm sure," she said nastily, "that we're all anxious to make things pleasant for you."

"You better," Kirby snarled, "because if any one of you makes trouble I'll slam you right into the brig. Believe me, the only reason you're here is biological. Women, unfortunately, are a necessary adjunct to colonization."

He turned to climb the ladder again, and then some underlying twinge of pity made him turn again and say,

"Don't think about what you've left behind. Think about what's ahead. It's a beautiful world. Very much like Earth. You can have your pick of places to live. It isn't inhabited. You can make new towns, a whole new country, just to suit yourselves.

There'll be others along too. We're not the only ones who still think freedom wasn't so bad. Your kids will grow up to be the lawmakers of a new world, the pioneers of a galactic civilization."

It sounded fine when he said it. He hoped it would work out that way.

Someone said, "You don't know what it's like there any more than we do. Nobody's ever been there. What's the use of lying about it?"

KIRBY groaned. "I thought that had been explained to you. All right, I'll give it to you again. Years ago the Government built a special long-range base on Pluto and sent out from it a robot star-ship. It was strictly a reconnaissance flight. They wanted to know what was out there, and whether it held any threat to System security. The data the R-ship brought back were never made public, naturally. But those things have a way of getting out. I've seen clips from the films taken by automatic cameras, and photostats of data concerning atmosphere, gravity, temperatures, the works. Alpha Centauri has an A-1 habitable planet. Does that satisfy you?"

"I'll believe it," said the large young woman, "when I see it. In the meantime—how long will we be shut up in this smelly old trap?"

"Well," said Kirby uncomfortably, "quite a while."

"That's no answer. Weeks? Months? Years?"

"Years. About five of them. Our velocity is something under the speed of light—"

Too much under. The R-ships are faster. The question is, do we have enough head start? Once we land, we'll be safe—scatter out and hide—a planet's a big place. But if we miscalculated, if they overhaul us—

"Five years. Five *years?*"

Kirby said, "We've got supplies, if we're careful with them. We've got a doctor and a nurse, and you're all in good health. We—"

But suppose we did miscalculate, and suppose our emergency plan doesn't work? Suppose something goes wrong with the ship, with the air supply, or the water, or suppose we're hulled by a hunk of drift too big to patch up after? And then, oh God, what will we have done? The women had a choice, maybe. But the kids—no.

He looked at the fat child straddling the large young woman's ample hip. It stared back at him, pop-eyed, smearing tears over its face with a grubby palm. Its nose was running. It snuffled, and Kirby was overcome with awe and horror and a sense of guilt.

Somebody shrieked in anguish, "Five years? You mean that for five long solid years I've got to stay in this room with certain people I wouldn't associate with—"

Voices.

"Joe Zimmerman, what did you mean, telling me it wouldn't take long? Joe, you come back here and answer me—"

"But I didn't bring nearly enough clothes—"

"—no decent kitchen, and those awful beds—"

"—no real privacy, you can hear every word that's said, it's indecent!"

"—have a baby *here?*"

"How could you dare to get me into this?"

Bedlam.

Kirby fled up the ladder, clapped the hatch shut, and made it fast. When the men, such as were left alive, came on watch again, somebody else could let them out.

He went back to the bridge. Pop started to say something, and thought better of it. Kirby went over to Shari and put his two hands on her shoulders. "Women are fine," he said. "I have nothing against them. But if you ever start acting like one, I'll break your neck."

Pop Barstow laughed. "Son," he said, "you don't know it, but you have only just begun to fight."

V

IN THE gulf that runs from Sol to Alpha Centauri there were now two ships. One was far ahead, but the second ship was possessed of an infinite patience and a greater speed. With every space-league the gap between them grew a little smaller.

On the second ship there was silence, within and without. Nothing human lived in it. There was no need of anything human. The ship was sufficient unto itself.

MURDER

A KILLER'S FOOTSTEPS SLITHERING SOFTLY IN THE GLOOM, MOONLIGHT GLINTING ON A WEAPON —THEN THE MERCILESS STROKE OF MURDER!

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From its dark hull the sensor field spread wide, infinitely sensitive, tirelessly inquisitive. It touched an object, plunging nearer on an oblique course. Through its external contact-points the sensor-field transmitted a series of impulses to the "bridge"—the walled heart, the protected mind, the cold, precise soul of the ship. There were brains there, large and small—not of flesh, but cybernetic brains of transistors and coils and wires, whose thought was a swift shuttling of electrons. They thought, now. With unhuman swiftness they evaluated the information, set up curves and plotted vectors on the computers, and reached their conclusion. Object: meteor. Course: collision.

The cold, limited, unhuman minds acted upon that conclusion at once. A message was flashed to relays, which sprang instantly alive. Throttles opened, the port lateral generators produced blasts of energy. The ship, moving at a velocity just under the speed of light, changed course—not a fraction too much, not a fraction too little.

The meteor went past, at a safe distance. The relays clicked again. The compensators hummed. There was another little burst of energy. On a master panel red needles on several dials crawled back until they were once more contact-aligned exactly with the black ones that monitored the course. The necessity for thought passed, the cold cybernetic brains ceased to think. And again, the all-pervading silence fell.

No passengers, no crew. But the ship carried a cargo. Ranked in the nether darkness, their atomic warheads pointing down the launching tubes, the missiles slept and waited, until their own relay systems should call them to go forth and fulfill themselves.

In the RSS-1, peace and no time.

In the *Lucy B. Davenport,* far too much time and no peace at all.

Lying in his bunk Kirby tried to sleep and failed. From across the tiny cabin Shari's even breathing mocked him. She seemed to be able to detach herself from her surroundings and exist undisturbed inside a kind of cocoon of patience that he envied but could not emulate. In the darkness, Kirby lit a cigarette and swore inaudibly, and felt old beyond Methuselah.

Time.

Chronometers. Calendars. Clocks. Days with no sunrise, nights with no moon. Arbitrary segments cut from a universal darkness, a formlessness, nothingness. Segments cut and shaped into little symbols and named with names that had no longer any meaning. What is Monday, in the spaces between the stars?

Time. . . .

I should have done this when I was young, thought Kirby. I was sure of myself then. Now I don't know. I don't know at all. And I've got 'em here, the whole howling lot of 'em. Say the other guys are to blame as much as I am, we were all in it together, made the plans and did the work and took the chances all the same—okay. But it all hung on a pilot, and that's me. Pop Barstow is too old. Joe Davenport—he was the start of it all, this was his ship and he hid her and kept her safe and started the whole plan—he's been dust on the Martian wind for years now. There aren't any young pilots any more, except the ones I've trained myself right here aboard. So it was up to me. I did it. If it hadn't been for me they'd all be sitting safe at home right now.

Time. . . .

Computers. You know your own velocity. You know the top potential of the R-ship. You know the distance. You figure as near as you can how long it takes to get that particular R-ship out of mothballs and in shape to go. You pare down even that interval, so as to be sure you're not giving yourself an edge you don't have. You feed all this stuff into the computer and you get an answer, and you still don't know. You can't be sure. It's too close. You just have to sit and wait and sweat and pray, and it's one hell of a feeling.

The cigarette was burned down to his fingers. He ground it out very carefully and reached for another, and then stopped. Pretty soon there would not be any more, but there was no use pushing it. Shari's peaceful breathing began to rasp on his nerves. He wanted to wake her up and make her sit and twitch with him, but he fought down that desire, too. Instead he got up and pulled on his pants and crept out without making any sound. Outside in the corridor he stood for a moment trembling, thinking how it would be if anything

happened to her. One in a million, she was. If they made it, if things worked out, they could still have kids. It wasn't too late. . . .

Or was it? How close is that black shadow behind you in the void, the shadow you haven't seen nor heard but that you know is there, the swift shadow following?

He went forward to the bridge. Pop Barstow slumbered on the bench, and in the co-pilot's seat young Marapese, still too new to his responsibilities to be bored with them, sat rigidly erect, watching the banks of indicators that had said nothing too for far too long a time. Radarman Shaw sat in his cubby, half asleep. He needed a shave, and in repose his face bore the sulky expression of a child kept after school. Kirby walked over and kicked the bench hard under where Pop Barstow was lying.

"Hell of a watch you keep," he said.

Pop grunted and sat up, blinking at Kirby. "Too conscientious," he said. "That's the trouble with all you young fellows. Look." He pointed to Marapese, and then to Shaw. "What's the good of me staying awake too?"

"Because you're the senior officer," Kirby snarled. "Because it's customary. Because the kid's only a theoretical pilot as yet. Suppose something comes up he doesn't know how to deal with?"

"He'll wake me," said Pop reasonably. "You worry too much. That's bad. Ages a man before his time. Go back and get your sleep, Kirby. Anything happens, I'll let you know."

"All right, damn it, but stay awake!"

Kirby left the bridge. He started to go back to his cabin, but he had never felt less ready for sleep. He was tired, but there was a quivering restlessness on him, a sense of oppression. He did not know whether it was an honest presentiment or only the result of thinking too much about the same thing. Anyway, he couldn't go back in that dark little coop. He went instead to the hatch that led to the cargo deck.

IT WAS kept closed. You couldn't have a bunch of kids swarming around the bridge, handling things. He opened it as quietly as he could and went down the ladder. It was dark below, except for a few dim lights. It was night time. You knew that because a bell rang and after a while the main lighting-tubes blinked off. Otherwise there was no change. There were no ports in the cargo deck, but if there had been it would have made no difference. What was outside had not altered since the day when, as a sort of afterthought, He made the stars also.

Kirby stood on the ladder and listened.

A child was crying, somewhere at the far end of the deck. People snored and turned and whimpered in their sleep. It was warm. The air was pure enough, but it had a stale flat taste from being breathed too many times and run through chemicals and across the hydroponic tanks. It smelled in here, of people and washing and food and babies—especially babies.

The child stopped crying. The muffled stirrings and sighings blended into a dim monotone. Kirby took hold of the iron rail. For some reason he had begun to shake. The air was heavy. The curtained cubicles wherein the families slept looked queer and shadowed in the dimness. The people were all hidden. There was not a human face. It was as though he stood alone, and underneath his feet the ship seemed weighted with a dreadful burden. Quite suddenly, Kirby turned and sprang up the ladder.

Shari was in the corridor. He thought she had been waiting for him beside the hatch. He looked at her and then past her, his eyes bright and hard, with an unnatural wideness.

"I'm going to turn back," he said.

"No."

"Damn it," he said roughly, "don't tell me no. I'm going back. I can't lead them all to the slaughter. I thought I could. I can't. We'll never make it. We haven't a chance in hell of making it."

"Kirby, listen. Don't be afraid now when it's too late. You had a great thought—"

"Who am I to have great thoughts? I'm nobody. I'm going back."

"Kirby—"

"Shut up. Don't argue with me." He was shaking all over, hard, and he couldn't stop. He had never felt like this before. It scared him. The iron walls of the corridor bent and wavered, and the deck moved

under his feet. "I've got to get them back. I—"

"Kirby, they want you on the bridge."

Her voice. Her quiet voice. Death, destruction, the hammer stroke, the end. He turned his head. There was no corridor now, no iron wall, the outer darkness had crept in and covered everything except her face. And it was pale and strange, and the eyes in it were shining.

He said, in a voice that was not his own, but very softly, "They haven't called me."

"They will."

The whiteness and the blur that were Shari moved toward him and touched him with living lips, and his own flesh was cold, cold.

Someone was coming down the corridor, coming fast.

Kirby straightened up. The steps rang loud against the metal, a man's steps, running. Kirby waited.

It was Marapese. He was a young man and ashamed of fear, and he was trying not to show it, but when he spoke the words stumbled and stammered in his throat.

"Sir, Shaw says—" Pause. Tighten the lips and swallow and try again. "On the radar, sir—"

"All right." Kirby's voice was easy. It was confident, soothing, even jovial. He didn't know where it came from. He nodded to the hatch. "We don't have to tell them just yet. Shari, see about some coffee for us, will you? We'll be on the bridge." He put his hand on Marapese's shoulder. The hand was steady as a rock. It seemed not to be his own hand, but it was steady and it would do. The shoulder underneath it quivered. Kirby said, "Come on." He walked forward toward the bridge. He felt hollow inside, there was nothing to him but a shell, but no one would have known it to look at him. Marapese glanced sidelong at him, a glance of worship. His own backbone stiffened and grew straight.

Behind them, Shari smiled.

KIRBY and the boy came into the bridge. Shaw was hunched over the 'scope. Pop Barstow stood with one hand on the pilot's chair, his eyes riveted on Shaw, like one uncertain whether to go forward or back, and he was an old man. Kirby had never realized before how truly old he was.

Shaw said, "It's still a long way off, but it's—" He hesitated. "—*it.*"

"Yes," said Kirby. He glanced through the port of the inner bulkhead, into the space where the computers were. "That's all the good they were to us. We didn't even come close."

Pop Barstow said, in an unnaturally dry voice, "Too many variables. We were slower than we'd hoped. They were faster."

Marapese asked, "What do we do now?"

"We stop it," Kirby said, as though it were the simplest thing in the world.

Marapese stared at him. "Stop it?" he repeated. "Stop an R-ship?"

He said it blankly, as in the past one might have said to a man standing on a railway track, top a locomotive?

Pop Barstow laughed, a laugh of unutterable sadness. "They have a plan," he said. "I've seen it. It's a pretty plan. It looks real good, all drawn up neat on a big white sheet of paper." He sat down in the pilot's seat and looked at Kirby. "You know what? We were crazy, and I was crazier than the rest of you. I was old enough to know better." He shook his head. "I'd have liked to live a while longer. Young folks think it doesn't matter to folks like me, but even when you're old you like living."

Kirby did not speak. He seemed to be thinking, very hard. Shaw squirmed and sweated over the radarscope. Marapese, very pale now, looked at them.

Shari came in with the coffee.

Kirby looked up. Shari set the tray down, violently, so that the metal cups rattled. "No," she said. "I couldn't do that, Kirby, it isn't the same—"

Kirby said slowly, "A cybernetic brain isn't so different from a human one. The principle is the same. It thinks."

The color had run out from under Shari's skin, leaving it ashen. "But you have seen, Kirby—I am only a little able, I could not do it—"

A strange ruthlessness had risen in Kirby. "It might give us the edge we have to have. Pop's right, the plan we've got is so much for the birds, unless we add something to it."

Marapese stared at Shari's stricken face,

not understanding. But Pop Barstow understood, and was shaken. "It seems creepy," he muttered, "but it might do it—it might—"

Kirby said to Shaw, "Keep tracking it. We need an absolutely accurate check on course and velocity. I'm going down to get Wilson and Krejewski." He thought, "And oh God, I've got to tell them all, and when those women start screaming—"

He got the surprise of his life, when he went below and told them. He spoke as casually as he could to Wilson, and to Krejewski who had spent his adult life building and repairing R-ships, and to Weiss, who had been a junior assistant in Cybernetic Division. He spoke, and braced himself for the outcry.

It came—but it was only one solitary wail from Sally Wilson, followed immediately by a smack from Mrs. Krejewski. "They have to do it," she told Sally. "Don't make it any harder for them." Then she turned to Kirby. "Just don't come back without my George, that's all." Kirby looked into her eyes and thought that if anything did happen to George it had better happen to him, too. It would be easier.

HE HERDED his three lagging heroes up the ladder and back to the bridge, still stunned by the unexpected ease of something he had dreaded. Pop Barstow grinned a little. "I told you you didn't understand women, Kirby. They'll make your life miserable over little things, but when something really big comes along they surprise you." He nodded. "Look at Shari."

Kirby looked. Her face was pale, but no longer stricken. "Still afraid?" he asked her.

"Yes. But I see that I have to try. And I would rather go with you than stay behind." She added, very earnestly, "Don't trust in me too much. I don't know that it can be done at all, and if it can, I don't know whether I will read it right."

"You'll be okay. Pop, take them along, get them ready, and give everything a final double-check. Everything. Take your time, don't hurry it. I've got to work out the timing and the course."

He turned to Shaw, and ultimately to the computers. Velocity of *Lucy B. Davenport,* so much. Velocity of R-ship, so much. Differential. Rate of approach. Course of *Lucy B. Davenport*. Course of R-ship, which cannot possibly fire its missiles ahead of it because it's already travelling at absolute top under the speed of light and has therefore to parallel and head the slower ship, releasing its missiles on a reverse arc. Relative position of two ships now, plus mean distance on plane of flight, plus potential velocity of life-skiff, plus estimated relative position of—

You plot parallelograms on nothing, you look at the figures and they are not realities. The realities are Nemesis, and fear, and human beings trapped in an iron trap, and folly, and a dream.

You plot the parallelogram, and it is only the beginning. The R-ship is intelligent.

It is wary. It will not permit a skiff, or a man, or a chunk of cosmic drift to get close to it. The sensor field provides a barrier, a defense impossible to penetrate. So you think again and figure again. You extend the short line in the parallelogram that is the projected course of the life-skiff, and you add to it so many degrees of arc after it heads the still unfinished long line that is the course of the approaching R-ship. And then you bend that long line inward and then outward again in a swift apex, and you make a circle at that apex, a circle on nothing which will enclose the lives of Wilson and Weiss and Krejewski, of Shari and yourself. And if you have not forgotten how, you pray.

When there is no more value in either figuring or prayer, you rise and go.

The corridor seemed curiously foreshortened. There seemed no distance at all between the bridgeroom and the place where the port life-skiff housed, an embryo in an iron womb. The others were already inside it. Pop helped Kirby on with his space suit.

"Everything's right," Pop said. "I checked real careful. All the tools and stuff."

Kirby looked down at the bulky suit. "I hoped we wouldn't have to use these things. Oh, well. Put Fenner on the radio and see he keeps it wide open. I want contact all the way."

He climbed into the skiff, and took the controls. The lock sealed. A roar, a grinding, a whistle and a leaping shock, and they were free. The booster jets howled, briefly doubling the normal rocket-thrust to break the gravitational pull of the mother ship.

Behind Kirby, Shari sat very rigid.

Kirby paid no attention to them. He was too scared himself. He set his course, repeating the coordinates over aloud. He had Wilson check them too, just to be on the safe side.

"Kirby." Wilson's voice was a little raw. "Kirby, why did they have to drive us to this. They're only human, like us."

"Yes. But they're dedicated to a status quo. If we licked the R-ships and made it to a new world, too many people would want to follow."

Wilson said, "But we'd be too far away to bother *them*. Why—"

Kirby shook his head. "Nothing stays too far away forever. Forget about it. Shut up."

The skiff rushed on, making the first leg of its appointed course. The rockets drummed. Kirby glared at the indicators. The others sat in silence, in agony, in solid dread.

Presently Kirby said, "Time. Secure your helmets and check oxygen flow. Everybody's audio working? Okay." He switched on the small but very powerful communication unit built into the suit and spoke briefly to Fenner aboard the *Lucy Davenport*. "Clear both ways. One of us will be in contact with you from now on. We're going out now."

Wilson let out one sound that might have been a sob.

Kirby cut in the starboard laterals, throttled down to one-quarter maximum thrust. Moving fast now, he saw that the spaceline was secure, the long line that strung the four men and one woman together like bundles on a cord. "Get your hand rockets ready," he said, "but be damned careful how you fire them!" He added, with a last-minute touch of gentleness, "Don't worry. I've done this before. It's not so different from an ordinary space-jump for salvage."

He threw over the lever. The small lock opened and spewed them out.

VI

KIRBY'S heart came up and hit him under the chin and the enormous vault of stars reeled and wheeled around him, and his helmet audio was filled with the sounds of anguish from the four other shapes that rolled and sprawled and kicked in the unthinkable void.

"Get those rockets working!" Kirby bellowed. The five hand rockets flared raggedly, and then all together. The combined push was enough. The little skiff went on away from them, alone and empty, beginning its long curve toward its final destiny.

"Just take it easy," Kirby said. "Relax. You can't possibly fall."

Not possibly. There's no place to fall to. There's nothing here, nothing. You wonder why He made so much space and never used it. . . .

Man wasn't made for this. Man was born and bred for a million years on a planet, he needs solid ground under his feet. Or else he needs the illusion of it, an iron deck, a shell to close him in so his littleness looks its normal size, so he doesn't shrink and vanish and become no more than a tiny unheard shriek in a vastness where even the stars are small.

Courage. A man is supposed to have it. But where do you go to look for it when it's dropped out somewhere in the darkness where no sun shines?

"Kirby—"

"Kirby!"

"KIRBY!"

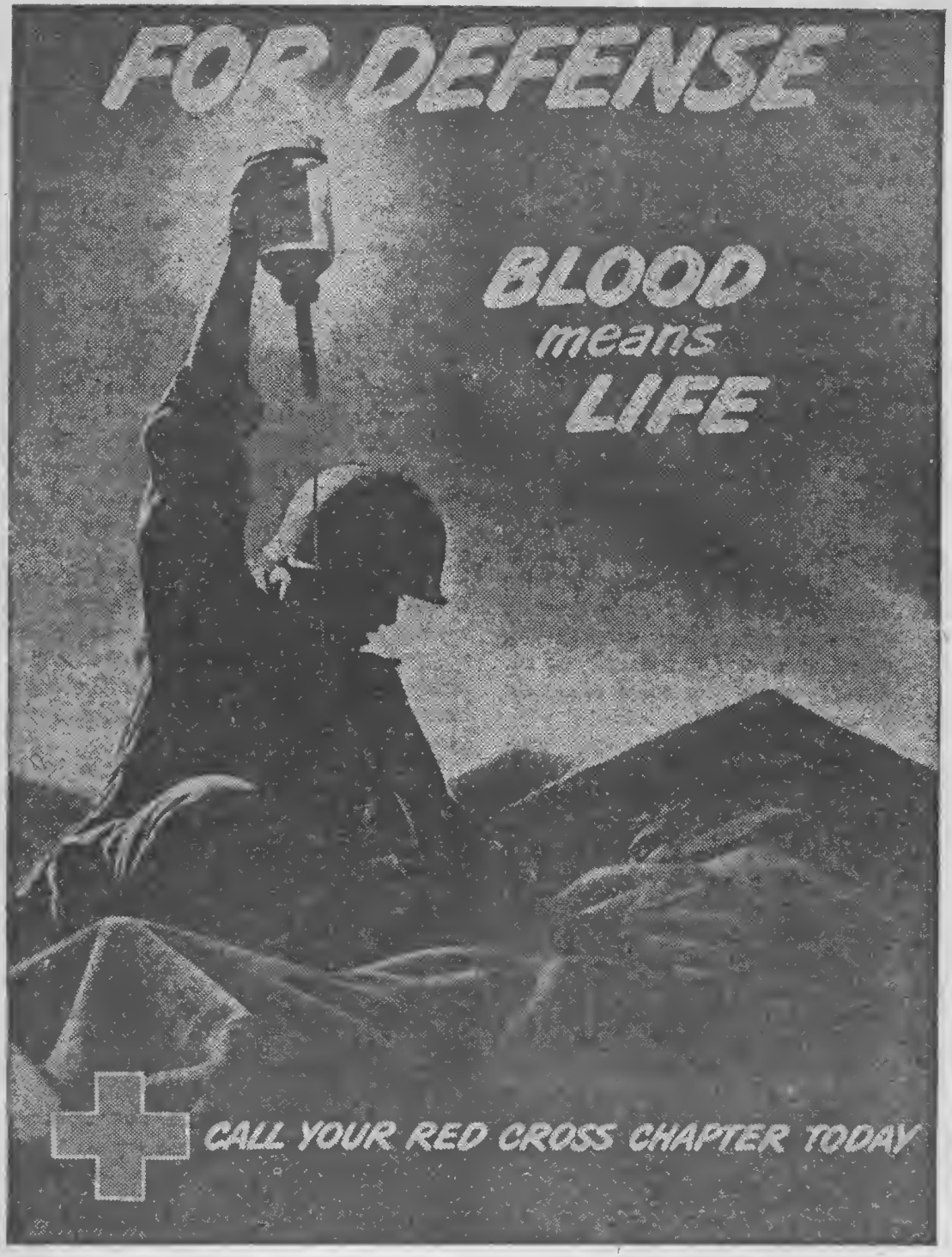
"What do you want? You're all right. All you have to do is wait."

"But Kirby . . ."

"I tell you we're okay, on time, in the right place. We can't miss."

Can't we? Were the calculations right? Will the R-ship swerve the way we want it to, or will it do something unexpected, something clever and uncanny? It isn't right for a ship to fly itself, to think and feel as though it were alive. And it's on its own out here. Pluto base is too far away for any contact now. All by itself. It isn't right.

Wish they had lights, like human ships. Hard to see one black blot against half the blackness in the universe. His eyes ached, looking into nothing, at nothing. He was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sick, and very cold. Voices spoke, and one of them was Shari's, and . . .

Did that star wink out?

A flicker. Another. A red streak. That's it, that's the laterals of the R-ship, its sensor-field has picked up the skiff curving round on the far side, and the so-and-so is swerving. . . .

A thin voice cried, "It's coming right into us!"

Kirby shouted. Orders, prayers, curses. Not many, there wasn't time. A black shape loomed. It did not seem, in that weird and silent gulf, to be moving. It merely grew, without sound or rush or roar. It was small. It grew and was large. It was enormous. It was close beside them.

It's sensed us, but it's overrun its ability. It can't swerve two ways at once. Fast, now. Make it fast. There won't be any other chances, and this is no place to be left behind!

Hand-rockets. Tiny sparks in the overwhelming All. Magnetic grapples, clanging hard on the dark cold metal, only there is no clang, it's as quiet as a deaf man's dream, and there are stars over and under and all around, except where the solid blackness is beneath your feet.

It's swerving again, to get away from these five little intruders into its sensor-field. There is still no sense of motion but you can feel the change of direction. The grapple lines come taut. Old man Inertia again, but this time he isn't big enough and a burst from the hand-rockets takes care of him. The lines slack again, the magnetic plates on your iron boots bite strongly. You have outwitted an R-ship. It is a triumph few men have achieved.

Few men? None, until now.

You are weak. The blood, the bone, the guts have run out of you. You merely cling, and stare at the emptiness where you might so easily have been left, and tell Fenner inanely over the radio, "We made it."

The hull shuddered slightly. Kirby thought, "It's trying to *shake* us off, like a dog!" A wave of superstitious horror lifted the hair on his head and then he saw the space-suit that had Weiss' name on it pointing astern, where a slim torpedo shape had begun its journey with a dignified, terrible deliberation.

"It's taking care of the skiff," Weiss said.

"Yeah," said Kirby. "Okay, Krejewski, Wilson—it's your show. Take over."

Shari had been silent, very silent since they had begun their clinging to the dark hull. Now she spoke, saying Kirby's name hesitantly.

"Are you getting anything?"

"I—don't know. Something. Cold and strange. It's not like human thought at all. Very cold, and clear like one single note, if I could only read it. . . . I think It knows we're here."

"The sensor-field would have told it that," said Weiss. "It sends all the data on everything it touches to the cybernetic control center in the bridge, where the information is correlated and—"

"I think," said Shari, "It hates us."

Again the chill of superstition crept and crawled in Kirby's nerves. He said angrily, "Don't go imagining things. It's only a machine. It can't feel."

"I suppose it can, in a way," Weiss said slowly. "As a safeguard against sabotage, against just what we're doing now. They're built that way, to regard humans as a menace. All their power has to be cut off before we can get in the ships on the ground, to service them."

Kirby growled, "Three experts and a telepath ought to be able to out-guess one lousy mechanical brain."

Wilson and Krejewski had been unhooking the cutting-torches from their belts. Wilson said nervously, "Might as well cut in here as anywhere. We'd never crack the doors. But remember these things have got automatic repair-devices, so get in fast when we hole through. Now stand clear."

OUT in the void that they had left behind, bright period to his words, a flare lit up the eternal night, burned savagely, and was gone.

"There goes the skiff. We're starting cutting. Keep clear!"

The rest moved back to the limit of their slack on the long line. The small hypnotic flicker of the ato-flames ate away at the metal.

Kirby questioned Shari. She only answered, in a remote queer voice, "It's still—thinking."

Krejewski suddenly yelled as the metal they were cutting bulged up under them. The lines snapped taut as the others pulled them back, and there was suddenly a big ragged hole in the ship's flank. And the ship stirred inwardly, as though it could feel the wound, as though the fine-drawn nerves of platinum that threaded all its bulk were carrying a message of pain.

Krejewski grunted, "Air blew out. The interior compartments will seal off automatically. Air pressure and temperature have to be kept constant—these sensitive gadgets won't do well in a vacuum at absolute zero—"

"Quit gabbling and get in!" Wilson cried.

Kirby thrust himself into the hole. The knife-edged beam of his belt lamp slashed into the blackness, picking out the enormous ribs of the ship, touching a network of steel struts and braces.

Shari said abruptly, "Something is coming. The—the brain of the ship has sent it—it doesn't think for itself, I don't know what it is."

"An automatic welder, to patch this hole," said Wilson. "Hurry!"

Kirby glimpsed something moving in that interior darkness. He pulled with all his strength on the rope that linked him to Weiss. A flash of Weiss' belt lamp lit the thing that was coming, a thing moving ponderously on gliding bands of magnetized metal, a huge distorted spider crawling toward the hole.

Weiss came through, with Shari's feet almost on his shoulders. They were pushing each other from outside now, in a panic. Shari was in, and Wilson came through with three pairs of hands hauling hard, and Wilson pulled frantically on Krejewski's boots.

"The thing's stopped," shrilled Weiss. "Right at the edge of the hole, right beside us—"

It's measuring, Kirby thought. Give it a second or two to determine the size of the hole, and—damn these robots! Damn every one that was ever made, right back to thermostats and self-turning-off ovens. Men ought never to have surrendered to machines. What the hell's keeping Krejewski? I never knew he was thirty feet high.

It only seemed that way. Actually, Krejewski popped in like a cork from a bottle, but he had no time to throw away. The calculating circuits in the welder had finished their computation. From out of its unlovely body it produced a steel plate of the proper size and clapped it over the hole, clearing Krejewski's helmet by less than a foot. He was barely out of range of the backlash when the welding flames went into action.

They worked their way in to the catwalk and clung there, watching while the inexorable machine welded them securely inside the R-ship. No one mentioned that. Their thoughts were too unpleasant for utterance.

Finished with its duty, the welder moved away, returning to whatever place it occupied in the dark silence of the hull when it was not needed. Krejewski muttered, "Wait until the air is replaced in this section. That'll unseal the bulkhead doors."

They waited. Kirby's heart was pounding fast and hard. He was sweating inside his suit. Presently the hard-edged lamp-beams softened and diffused. There was air again. He opened his helmet. The air was warm, stale, unused, unbreathed, tainted with unhuman smells of metal and oil and plastics and hot glass.

Shari's face emerged from the obscurity. "It knows we're here inside it," she whispered. "Kirby, it *does* hate us—not as a man would hate, I've seen hate and it comes hot and bright into the mind, a red thing like fire—this is different. This is cold. Dark. It's not living, and yet it is. It knows how to destroy us, and it will."

"Can you see how?" asked Kirby eagerly.

She whimpered, and he thought she was going to weep. "If I were not so frightened, if I could keep my own mind clear—" With shocking suddenness she did break into tears. "I told you I was not good enough for this, not to depend on me!"

"There was no one else," said Kirby quietly. "You can do it, if you really try."

She did not answer, and he did not know what she was thinking now. The light was better now, with the air diffusing the glare of the lamps. Aft and forward ran the catwalks, and the arching braces, and the walls of gleaming metal. It was not like a ship. It was not made for men. The catwalks

were the one small concession to them.

Kirby said, "We'd better get a move on."

Krejewski pointed. "It—what we're after—is up in the bridge."

THEY tried to hurry, but in that almost zero-gravity they moved like swimmers in deep water, floating, stumbling. The catwalks were floored with a yielding plastic tile, no good for magnetized boots. They seemed to be fumbling their way through a brooding metal labyrinth, dark, silent.

Kirby had a nightmare vision of failure, of four men and a woman trapped and dying slowly in an unmanned ship that would bear their bodies back to Sol as mute evidence of a mission accomplished. He dreaded each moment to hear the lateral rockets begin, to know that they had headed the *Lucy B. Davenport* and that it was too late.

"If we'd tried for the torpedoes," Wilson mumbled. "Maybe, if we could have fired them off—"

"They're locked in tight," Weiss' voice retorted. "And even without them, the ship could have been used to ram the *Lucy.*"

"They can't have it under control now, not at all this distance!"

"They don't have to! The pattern of its mission was set up for it, and the alternative methods of achieving it. The little cams and buttons will do the rest."

"Shut up and bring that torch here," Kirby said. "Quick."

He was at the bridgeroom door, and it was closed and locked. A key back at Pluto base would open it, but nothing else but brute force would.

The torch bit into the metal. Wilson muttered, as he played it, "Never been up this high before. Nobody but the top cyberneticists rated access to the bridge. I wonder—"

"Don't wonder."

The lock, burned through, grated and sagged. Kirby pushed the door open.

"Listen, what's that?"

Kirby had heard it too, the snick of metal and a soft humming. The humming kept on.

He was looking into darkness. There were no windows in this bridgeroom. The mariner who navigated here had surer senses than sight.

He swung his lamp. They looked at the thing.

There was an odd relief about seeing it. One had almost imagined a great figure, a monstrous metallic face, a something—

Here was just a machine. Humans had made it, humans had given it its orders. That was all. Just like the calculating machines that were so familiar these days—the tall bank of transistor-cells, the deceptively simple wiring, the shielded power leads, the vernier dials for wave settings.

No metal face, no staring eyes, nothing humanoid or menacing, nothing but a machine that humans had made and humans could smash up. He lifted his heavy wrench and started forward.

"Kirby, wait!"

Shari's voice had something in it he'd never heard. That, rather than the warning in her words, stopped him.

"There's danger," she said. "Wait. Don't go. I can get it—I can almost get it. It's waiting, something warned it of our approach, it's—"

"Oh, hell," said Wilson.

"I'm not hysterical!" she cried. "It's hard to explain, I get it just over the limits of consciousness, but this—this thing—it's *prepared.*"

Kirby felt the hairs lift on the back of his neck. "Keep back," he told them. "Give me room to swing."

He swung the heavy wrench and hurled it at the dialed face. What happened, happened fast.

The wrench, a yard from the dials, flew back at them with a flash of light. Weiss screamed. There was a metallic clang. Then silence.

"It hit me—I think my forearm's broken!" cried Weiss.

"It threw the wrench back at us," said Wilson, his voice hoarse. "Like—like—"

Kirby got control of his own feelings. "Listen. There's a force-field around it. It came on automatically when we broke in. Of course. It came on to protect it, for only intruders would break in."

"But we can't get through that," Krejewski said. "There's no way."

"So we're licked?"

Then suddenly a sweet, high-pitched note of sound sang from the tall metal bank

of cells. Nothing else—no movement, no lights.

But, instantly, there came the low rumble of the port laterals firing.

Kirby, at the first vibration of that rumbling thunder, dived toward the others. They were in a group back of him. He knocked them staggering toward the door opening, Weiss yelling as his arm hit something.

Their tangled little group wedged against the door. The ship canted sharply. It moved in a turn too sharp for any human crew to endure, but perfectly practicable for a ship that had no crew. It crushed them against the doorframe, Kirby desperately holding Shari.

The rumble of rockets stopped. The pressure relaxed. Weiss was sobbing from pain.

"Damn near threw us into that force-field," Wilson was saying. "Let's get out of this!" He scrambled panically away.

Kirby hauled him back. "Get out, to where? To empty space? Not to the ark—it won't exist, if we leave here now! This R-ship is starting to head around. Do you understand that? It's altering course, and that means it'll soon be launching its warheads at the ark. Unless we stop it!"

"But how? We can't get near it—we can't touch it—how?"

Kirby swore. He looked at the thing that lay so securely beyond their reach. He hated it. It was the symbol and the force of the power that had enchained mankind. It was everything that he and the others on the ark had fought and fled from, and it had won, reaching even here into the emptiness between the stars to grasp at human aspiration and make it not. A great rage rose up in him.

"Weiss, you're the cybernetics man. Dammit, stop blubbering and listen to me! We can't smash it up by brute force—okay. Isn't there another way? Men build these things. They can't be smarter than men. They can't be all-powerful."

WEISS answered wearily, "They might as well be as far as we're concerned. Even if we knew the frequency and the code that controls this particular ship, it wouldn't do us any good. See that master panel? It's different from any other I've seen, designed especially for a star-ship that has to be out of touch with its base, on its own. It's locked. Nothing's going to change the settings on it until the orders they represent have been carried out. Then they'll shift into the 'Return to Base' position. And that's that."

"It has an order," Kirby said. "It can't disobey that order." He was fishing for an idea, a nebulous thing out of human psychology remembered from a lot of long dark years. Suddenly he took Weiss by the shoulders. "These cybernetic brains aren't very different from the human variety, are they?"

"No. Look out, you're hurting my arm. Simpler, of course, faster reaction time on a lot of things, only subliminal 'emotional' complications—no, they're not too different."

"Weiss, you and Wilson are going to figure out from watching its reactions what wave-length the thing is sensitive to. And you've got no time to do it in. Fenner, stand by with every amp you've got. Give me a scatter band in the UH frequencies, the banned-off ones." The ark's communicator had been built before the banning, before there was no longer any need for ships to talk together across space. Near a control center it would have been drowned out by the vastly more powerful transmitter, but here in this untracked waste of nothingness it might work. It might.

"Watch it," he said to the two men hanging irresolute in the doorway. "Switch in, and give your readings direct to Fenner."

"Kirby," said Wilson, "you're crazy. But I guess it doesn't matter now. I'm sorry we all did this thing, though. I should have stayed on Mars. I don't want Sally and the kids to die. I don't want to die myself."

Kirby hit him, clumsily, savagely, across the back. "Then watch it, damn you! *There!*"

A bank of transistors that had been dark glowed briefly, and were dark again. Weiss began to talk, very fast, very nervous, to Fenner. Kirby got busy with the space-line. There were railings on the catwalk. He threw hitches over them, made himself and the others fast so they couldn't be pitched forward into that deadly room, or smashed

against the struts. He took Shari in his arms and said to Krejewski, "Hang on. If this works, it'll be rough."

"Narrow it down," Weiss was saying. "What have you got there? No, you lost it again. Higher. That's it. I think. Oh, God, my arm hurts. No, no, Fenner, try it again, slower, hold it—it's receiving now but it isn't reacting, what good is the frequency without the code word? It could be anything. Run through the alphabet, fast. Maybe we—"

Again that one sweet note, and the following thunder of the laterals. Again the terrible hand of inertia struck them, crushed them, left them dazed and gasping.

"Hurry it up," said Kirby. "Hurry." Wilson wept and cursed him. Weiss, half conscious in the doorway, was muttering his ABC's.

"M, N, O—no reaction yet, go on—P, Q, R, S—S! Hold it, Fenner. There was a flicker on S. It's waiting for the rest of the word. The rest of the word. There's a million of 'em beginning with S."

"Try STAR," said Kirby.

It didn't work.

It was Fenner who suggested STELLA. It worked.

"Pour it on," Kirby shouted. "Tell it to sheer off, change course. Fast, FAST!"

The receiving unit glowed and a humming, soft and busy, arose in the relays of the brain.

"Hang on!"

This time it was the starboard laterals. Krejewski and Wilson yelled together in mingled anguish and delight. Weiss had fainted. Kirby, holding tight to Shari and enduring the pressure, did not exult. The burst was short. Almost at once the port laterals roared again. The locked master control and the compensators were not to be defeated so lightly. The RSS-1 was back on course again.

"Keep it coming," Kirby said. "Tell it to return to base. Tell it to by-pass its master circuit, I don't suppose it can, but it might confuse it." Past Wilson's crouching shape he could see the glow and flicker of the banked transistors. Cerebration, naked and visible. It still seemed like witchcraft to Kirby. Fenner's voice spoke in his ears, remote and twanging like a taut wire. "It's getting awful close to us—what's it doing there?" Kirby could feel him sweating.

The starboard laterals swung the ship over in a vicious arc. Kirby braced himself. "It's beating us to death," he gasped, "but that's all right, that's what I want—" One breath, one burst of speech before the compensators took over.

Krejewski whispered, "We can't take much more of this."

"Pour it on, Fenner. Return to base—"

Shari, who sagged in his arms like a limp rag doll, lifted her head and said, "It's confused, it—" She quivered, seizing his wrist with desperate hands. "Kirby, hold me, I'm afraid!"

Thunder. Chaos. Pressure, vertigo, a gasping and a straining and a cry, five small soft humans crushed and trapped between titanic forces. The laterals boomed and kicked, fighting each other, hurling the ship into a mad pinwheel flight, across nothing, to nowhere. Kirby, blinded, deafened, barely conscious, screeched triumphantly, "Pour it on!" The darkness was full of sound.

In the bridgeroom, in the brain, something blew.

Convulsion, the throes of death. Crazy, it can't be dying, it never lived. It's only an iron hull, a cold hulk, soulless. Why does it kick and lash itself about like a living thing in pain? Oh, no, oh, God, stop it, I can't stand it any longer, my own agony is too great!

Hear the strands of its brain parting? Hear the snap and the anguished tearing? It's only glass and metal. It can't feel. Shari, don't, stop wailing. Shari—

Suddenly, it is very still.

The ship is dead.

Shari is still weeping. "It was bewildered, it couldn't understand. Kirby, it knew, and at the end it was afraid. It was afraid of its own madness."

Crazy. It wasn't human. But wasn't it a human trick you played on it? Give it orders it can't obey, impulses it can't satisfy, and what happens? What happens to the infinitely more complex, more flexible and reasoning brain of a man, when it is tortured with conflicting problems it can't solve? It splits wide open. The doctors have a name for it. Schizophrenia.

It's dead, and the ship is only a plunging wreck.

Kirby got up. He freed himself from the rope and stumbled forward over the squirming, groaning bodies of men who were, miraculoulsly, still alive to groan. It was silent in the bridgeroom. It had always been silent, but now there was no presence in it. He got his hands on something and threw it. It crashed with a bursting tinkle into the master panel, where the dial settings remained unaltered, inexorable in authority. Kirby laughed. The force-field was gone. He picked up the wrench that had broken Weiss' arm. For a moment he ceased to be Kirby, or any other man. He was rebellion. He was all the people in the ark. He was the people who would follow them in other ships. He was the might and the power of his kind, trampling and smashing and wrecking with insensate joy the might and power of the dark ships. He was humanity. He was triumph.

He didn't know that he was any of these things. The wrench dropped out of his hands. He was exhausted and his battered body hurt. He walked slowly out of the bridgeroom, his boots crunching on broken glass. "Come on," he said. "Come on, you guys, we've still got to cut our way out of this." Into the radio, to Fenner, hysterical on the other end, he said only, "We licked it. Tell Pop to come over and pick us up."

Ahead, the way to the stars was clear. Behind them, for better or worse on the far-flung worlds of Sol, the day of the robot ships had begun its end.

Kirby roused up his army of four, and stumbled away along the catwalk in the silence and the dark.

THE VIZIGRAPH

(*Continued from page 3*)

SENTIENT? NO!

63 Glenridge Ave.,
St. Catharines, Ont.,
Canada

Dear Editor,

I've come through another ish of PLANET once more, and I must say that the material was of excellent quality. What happened to Anderson this month? His cover wasn't like last time, or as good. No one really likes a dark cover, and to look at this one you'd think it was brought up somewhere from the lower recesses of hades! I suppose you can't have great covers all the time . . .

Oh, no! Berry, again? This boy doesn't know when to quit. The story had one of the weakest and oldest plots I've ever laid eyes on. Who was it said he's a carbon copy of Ray Bradbury? Oh, yes, Dave Hammond. Well, you pretty well hit it on the nose in some places, Dave, except for one thing. That is that Berry uses a freer style, plays around with words more, and tries too hard to liven his stories up, no matter what the damage to the end-effect. In short, Berry's latest, MARS IS HOME, was over-characterized . . . he starts off his story all about the professor, and in the end reveals the rocket as an equal hero because it's alive!

That's another familiar point. I've heard of that "sentient-metal" business too many times by now to have it passed on to me again. Although here's one thing I'm pro-Berry on: "I disagree mildly with Philip Brantingham's assertion that Berry "over-describes" . . . come now . . . he just picked out a few bad examples. Why, in MARS IS HOME, how could you better describe anything than "lights were pink blisters along the walls," or "men . . . like swift-moving spiders repairing, welding . . . " This can be commended.

You had some very remarkable stories this May. The first and lead novel was TEMPTRESS OF PLANET DELIGHT. B. Curtis smacks a bit of Eric Frank Russel. Pen-name? The style was very similar. It went to the extreme in some parts, but on the whole an idea like that of a red-tape planet is a good basis for any story.

To continue, the story could have been improved somewhat by bringing in an extra sympathetic character, someone with a slightly cholic temper, or one always getting into trouble. At any rate, how are we to know that B. Curtis isn't Berry again? There was that unmistakable English use and spelling of the word "kerb" for "curb," you know.

It must also be brought to your attention that EYES OF THE DOUBLE-MOON was an amazingly done and well-written story. Reminds me a bit of the immature Van Vogt. Hensley had a smooth, easy-going style, mixed with choice bits of satire and wit.

I think THE INFINITES deserved a better picture than it got. The story was handled well . . . not too boring. However, the angle of speeded-up evolution by atomic mutation is nothing new.

Gallun's GIVE BACK A WORLD had a slow start, but towards the end I was literally at the edge of my seat in suspense. Now Berry's might have been medium done last month, but this month the only one I'd rate below it would be CON-FEN, and it only because it was a short, humorous story, meant as breather more than anything else. This is because most of the stories are on a higher par. And want to see PLANET'S circulation take a hop? Get big names, just one or two an ish, and watch the rush.

Here is a carp. Please get a long novel for lead place!! Toss out a couple of those "star-flung" novelets. We don't need them. S'funny thing, some of your shorts are practically as long as your novelets! (I wonder if twenty or thirty pages from them sometimes accidentally fall into your wastebasket.)

COSMIC CASTAWAY must be mentioned here. It rates even higher than GIVE BACK A WORLD, or almost. Why didn't Mullen go into more detail about the patch-up jobs they did on Bell?

But tell me one thing, huh? In choosing varied letters for illo-privilege, the choosees pick their illos from which mag? The one in which their letter was printed, or the one which they were writing about (or alternately, if the letter they got printed was discussing a PLANET two months old, from the preceding mag)?

With that humble request, I'll humbly await the next ish of PLANET with great expectations . . . except, of course, if Bryan Berry manages to slip another of his "short stories" in here again. (Boy, you're giving a bad name to English stf, you know.)

Yours till Pluto becomes a summer resort,

JOE KEOGH

Ed's note: As to your query about illustration choices for the letter winners: I think the choice may be made from EITHER the issue written about OR the issue wherein the letter appears. In that way the choosee is given a wider selection range, and there is less chance of duplication of choice. . . . B. Curtis, I repeat, is not any one's pen monicker. B. is for Betsy. Curtis is for Curtis. And she pens her gems out of Pennsylvania.

UGH, WEAK STOMACH

Box 1296
Aransas Pass, Texas

Dear Editor,

Unlimber the ray gun and break out the space gear, Planet rides again! And very nicely, too, for a change. (A two-edged compliment if I ever saw one.) None of the stories exactly revolted me, and one or two actually pleased me. But then, I'm notoriously easy to please.

The cover, and I use the word loosely, was its usual horrible self, but the interior art is improving. Will wonders never cease. Matter of fact, there were even a couple I wouldn't mind owning the originals to.

"Authors may die and mags may pall but Joe Fann lives on!" The foregoing is a direct quotation from the works of Neva Gagg, the Sage of Strong Stomach, Wyoming. Funny thing about Neva, you know, attended some sort of a Convention in Chicago, and was never heard from again. Sad thing.

What are you doing Jack, printing two letters from the same fen in one Vizi? Not that I mind that so bad, what rankles is that mine didn't get in at all. Recall the old saw about woman scorned, Jack? Consider yourself forewarned.

All this ruckus about Bryan Berry seems to me to be, and I quote, "Much ado about nothing." I didn't get in on that 'triple threat' ish, but BB's story this (May) ish isn't anything to get excited over. Of course it's a lot better than I could do, so I won't get too derogatory, but it's a whole whale of a lot worse than what some authors could write with both hands tied behind them. (Typewriting with their nose, how else?)

Bit of blackmail coming up here, old wretch. I know why you don't list story wordage, and it ain't because you're lazy (tho that might have a little something to do with it). Listing the wordage would show

up your novels as novelets, your novelets as short stories, and your short stories as awful. (How did *that* creep in?)

Anyhow, now that the cat is out of the gag, I'll leave, cause the cat just laid an egg!

Fannette-ically,

MARIL SHREWSBURY

Ed's note: Don't look now, Maril, but Neva Gagg just snook in.

SOUNDOFF CHRISTOFF

39 Cameron St. South
Kitchener, Ont. Canada

Greetings and Hallucinations,

First a word to the children (Nelson, HAMmond and a few others) Listen children. There are other writers besides Bradbury who can write moody stories, but because of a few Bminded people like you a new writer cannot write a mood into a story without being accused of copying Bradbury's style.

If a writer just starting out had to create a new style of writing altogether, there would be precious few new writers. I always thought a person read a story for the story's sake, not because of the author's name.

So why not admit Berry is a damn good writer, and is not stealing Bradbury's style.

Now to you, Ed. What you got in your head besides a vacuum? Do you realize that you allowed two letters by Joe Keogh to be printed in La Viz. If you're hard up for letters write them yourself but never make this mistake again.

The cover wasn't bad but there were too many obvious mistakes. This proves my theory that you got nutten in your head. The inside illos were very good with the exception of the CON FEN mess.

Speaking of CON FEN, just what was your reason for using this? It was not well written; it was not amusing; it was however a sheer waste of space. Was this your intention or did it happen that way?

The following is how I rate the stories.

THE INFINITES
.....One diamond encrusted space ship
TEMPTRESS OF PLANET DELIGHT
.....One platinum space shpi
GIVE BACK A WORLD....One gold space ship
LAST RUN ON VENUS.....One silver space ship
COSMIC CASTAWAY.....One steel space ship
MARS IS HOME.....One iron space ship
EYES OF THE DOUBLE MOON
.....One brass space ship
CON FEN.....One rusty tin can

Sincerely,

FREDRICK B. CHRISTOFF

IN AND OUT OF MERCURY

8383 Reland
Cincinnati, 16, O.

Dear Ed.,

First, give number one honors to Philip Brantingham. I agree one-hundred percent. Bryan Berry is nothing but a poor imitation of Bradbury. Honest, Ed, you don't need come-ons like "PLANET'S great new discovery" to make us buy the mag. Fact is, PLANET is one of the few mags I still read since the current boom in STF publications. What's the matter—has the circulation dropped off?

Give second honors to Carol McKinney and her half-cracked professor. Heh, heh . . . it's people like you we need more of, Carol. Not a "nut" letter, but funny. Give third honors to Ray Nelson for a very readable letter—even tho I disagree with him. About Bryan Berry, that is.

For Ghu's sake, DON'T go digest size. DON'T get slick paper and DO leave the mag just the way it is. I like Anderson on the covers, always have, always shall. You could add a few pages to the Vizigraph, the—or am I asking too much?

GIVE BACK A WORLD by Gallun was fine. Just one thing I'm not clear about. On page 48, do the men descend 4000 miles into Mercury? How could this be when the diameter of the planet is only 3,000 miles? Or am I just stupid?

Now to Radell Nelson—I've read Fort too, Ray. And Miller and several other authorities. Mavis Hartman was accounting for the current crop of flying "saucer-shaped objects" in her letter, was she not? And sightings of strange things in the sky back before 1944 or even back for 150 years included everything from search-beams to flying horses and pigs, with webbed feet and wings. I'm sure Mavis was not attempting to account for such phenomena as this. We have reason to believe that the saucers are something different because of the amount sighted since the first in 1947, and because of the saucer shape. Of course "lights in the sky" have been observed since time immemorial—which could lend credit to the heat inversion theory.

Which is about all for this ish, Jack, me boy. Keep up the good work.

Fandemanately,

NANCY MOORE

Ed's note: The author does not say 4,000 miles INTO Mercury. That would be quite a stunt.

ONE FOR KING-SIZE

Sweet Springs, Missouri

Dear Editor,

Doubtless you will be subjected to some criticism for printing 2 letters from both Joe Keogh and Carol McKinney in the May issue. However unlike some, I don't object to such a practice. If a person can find time to write TWO interesting letters commenting on one specific issue by all means print them . . . both of them. As for myself I am hard pressed to write ONE. After all there are other mags, you know? I must spread my talents around.

That Anderson cover was one of the best he has ever done; even remembered to put a helmet on the girl. In the inside, Frank Kelly Freas' work was below par for him . . . ditto Emsh. Vestal seldom does a bad illo. Why not let H. B. illustrate the lead novel every issue? Also, why not more than one illo for the lead novel . . . two or three perhaps?

As for Lyle Kessler's suggestion that you go digest size . . . Gaaa I'm so sick of these "carbon copy" mags of today with their inevitable 35 cent price and digest-type logo that I'm seeing them in my opium dreams. Taking his suggestions one by one . . . (1) There is no reason to go small size . . . seems to me a mag can be popular without copying every other mags' format. (2) Why slick paper . . . I agree tho on one point—TRIM THOSE EDGES. More expensive paper isn't needed. (3) You don't necessarily have to have either Finlay or Cartier . . . get Valigursky, Ebel, Lawrence and Schomburg. (4) You aren't required to have Bradbury, Asimov, etc., to have a good mag, just keep buying material from Brackett, Anderson, Mullen and Fox. Naturally some fiction from Coppel, Sheckley, Kubilus, Abernathy, Neville and Wells (Basil) wouldn't be sneered at by yours truly. . . .

Afraid you slipped up in your answer to Carol McKinney. PLANET's first issue WAS NOT Spring

He Asked Permission to Stay

Major William E. Barber, USMC
Medal of Honor

EIGHT THOUSAND weary marines lay besieged at Yudam-ni; three thousand more were at Hagaru-ri, preparing a breakthrough to the sea. Guarding a frozen mountain pass between them, Major Barber, with only a company, held their fate in his hands. Encirclement threatened him; he was ordered to withdraw. But he asked permission to stay, and for five zero-cold days the company held the pass against attack. The Major, badly wounded, was carried about on a stretcher to direct defense. When relief came, only eighty-four men could walk away. But Major Barber's action had been decisive in saving a division.

"I know," says Major Barber, "that you at home realize what hard jobs our sons and brothers are doing in America's armed forces. Maybe you *haven't* realized that you're *helping* those men—whenever you invest in U. S. Defense Bonds. True, Bonds are personal financial security for you. But they also strengthen our economy—to produce the good arms and food and medical care that make our men secure."

Peace is for the strong!
For peace and prosperity save with
U. S. Defense Bonds!

Now E Bonds pay 3%! Now, improved Series E Bonds start paying interest after 6 months. And average 3% interest, compounded semiannually when held to maturity! Also, all *maturing* E Bonds automatically *go on* earning—at the new rate—for 10 *more* years. Today, start investing in Series E Defense Bonds through the Payroll Savings Plan.

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1942 but Winter 1939. What ever happened to the author of THE ROCKETEERS HAVE SHAGGY EARS? A par-excellent space opera. To be truthful I don't think PS is as good as it was in the 1949-50 period. Remember great stories like THE DEAD-STAR ROVER by Robt. Abernathy and ENCHANTRESS OF VENUS by Leigh Brackett?

Give pics to Carol McKinney, Regis Murphy and Joe Keogh.

Best Regards,
PAUL MITTELBUSCHER

Ed's note: Thousand pardons, fen. Winter 1939 marked PLANET's first appearance. But what's three years, more or less, when we're dealing with the vastness of space and the eternity of time?

ON THINGS UN-FICTION

385 No. 8th East St.
Provo, Utah

Dear Ed,

Is it my imagination or are the stories getting better in PLANET??? The May ish was the best one in all the years since it first came out—which brings up a point I really would like to settle! Just when did the first ish of PLANET appear? On page 110 in May you said it was Spring 1942. I believe, if you will look into the back files, or whatever it is you look into, you will find that someone has sadly misinformed you! Reason?? I have an ancient ish that informs the reader that it is Vol. 1, No. 8 and prominently displayed are other words: FALL 1941. Well?? (Ed's Note—Winter '39 is correct date)

Your boy, Berry, is apparently doing a little better. His short story this time was slightly more readable than either of the other two avalanches we got.

The only stories that were not worth reading were GIVE BACK A WORLD and THE INFINITES. The writings of Gallun and Dick lately seem to be getting more and more pessimistic. Who reads STF these days to be soured on life? If two types of people read it: (1) The escapists and (2) those who read it for enjoyment, neither, obviously, want exclusive pessimism. If a person only has a limited amount of spare time for his favorite reading material he wants to be cheered up during that time, not put the book or mag away with a gnawing feeling of uncertainty and general disgust with humanity as a whole.

To go to the other extreme in stories, CON-FEN was a pleasure to read, a delightful little episode in the trials and tribulations of an uninformed BEM.

Never did get the connection between the cover illo and any of the tales inside. This is PLANET'S new policy?—to make sure the (garish) cover portrays the artists' feelings and not the stories?

Letters:

1. Lyle Kessler 2. Paul Mittelbuscher 3. Radell Nelson.

Am I wrong, or is PLANET the only STF mag without an editorial? (F & SF excluded, too.) Really, I am curious—is it because you don't like to write editorials, Jack, or—? You do so well in the three short paragraphs at the top of VIZI just think what would happen if you turned loose with a whole page or more!

Note with gloom that you clamped down on the free advertising in the letters. Why would anyone actually object to such items of general interest??? (The wet-blankets!)

Is there any reason, seriously now—why PLANET couldn't have a personal column? You'd find it very popular and perhaps many would buy PLANET that wouldn't otherwise! You well know how a couple other STF mags have done this with notable success! There aren't any columns or articles whatsoever as it is, and to raise PLANET higher on the popularity list you know you've got to have something besides just stories (no matter how good they may be) and La Vizi.

And on that hopeful item I shall retire and eagerly await your reply.

CAROL MCKINNEY

Ed's note: Fiction is what PLANET attempts to serve up, and fiction is what we'd like to stick to . . . we feel that editorials and personal columns consume space better used for stories. . . .

OUTSIDE DILEMMA

Hq. Det., 9778th TSU
CCTC
Ft. McClellan, Ala.

Sir:

The cover of the May issue of PLANET Stories has many interesting and unpleasant implications. From the background of the cover the following facts may be inferred: 1. That a space ship has been attacked and the couple shown have escaped from it before it was destroyed. 2. The ship was attacked in the void.

If the above inferences are granted it follows that the lovely red head is in for an uncomfortable time due to the fact that she has only a helmet for protection. The dear girl has a choice of freezing to death, picking up some radiation burns, either cosmic or atomic (the latter from the damaged space ship), or her body may just explode in the void due to the equalization of pressure between herself and her environment.

If, however, none of these things happen and the life belt she wears works on the same principal as the one her companion wears, she is in for quite a burn. (See where the jet on the belt is pointing.)

Again assuming that the scene takes place in the void, what causes her garments to flow out behind her? You see what I mean about interesting and unpleasant implications?

A recommendation to the contributors to the Vizigraph. Read Ogden Nash's VERY LIKE A WHALE.

HOWARD E. NORMAN, SFC

Ed's note: We have a crazy penchant for keeping our femmes in interesting and unpleasant predicaments. So there.

THOSE SAUCY SAUCERS

Palisade, Nebraska

Dear Ed,

First, I'd like to congratulate you on your new reprint mag, TOPS IN SCIENCE FICTION. Keep using those swell old Paul illustrations. One story I would like you to see is ONE THOUSAND MILES BELOW by Binder.

Your May issue of PLANET was good all around. The only story that was below par was CON-FEN although I have seen some good stories with that plot. As to the novel TEMPTRESS OF PLANET DELIGHT I think it was very good. I can't recall ever having seen a plot like that before. Let's have more like it. GIVE BACK A WORLD ran a close second. Although most of the plot was familiar to me I must admit that the idea of using enormous rocket tubes to start Mercury rotating again was quite new. Guess I'll have to ask for more like that too

Most of the rest of the stories were just good although EYES OF THE DOUBLE MOON was a little above the average.

I'd like to hear Radell Nelson's comment on my theory about the flying saucers. It's my theory that the saucers are space ships, originating from some other planet, that are keeping Earth under observation. This would explain the recent group of sightings because atomic bomb explosions would readily be visible from another planet. The old sightings of cigar-shaped spaceships could be the spaceship originally developed while the circular ones would be an improvement.

I believe these saucers are powered by the electromagnetic fields in space. I got this idea from a book by Fernand Rousel called THE UNIFYING PRINCIPLE OF PHYSICAL PHENOMENA..

Yours truly,

RUSSEL BROWN

P.S. I would appreciate letters from anyone interested in flying saucers.

FREE TIME AND SPACE

2304 C. S.
Washington State College
Pullman, Wash.

Dear Editor,

The May ish was a little better than usual, so I thought I'd write and tell you about it. Here is how I rated the stories:

1. TEMPTRESS OF PLANET DELIGHT
2. COSMIC CASTAWAY
3. LAST RUN ON VENUS
4. EYES OF THE DOUBLE MOON
5. MARS IS HOME
6. CON-FEN
7. GIVE BACK A WORLD
8. THE INFINITES

If I didn't put in a few suggestions and gripes, you would probably die from pure surprise, so here goes. Get Poul Anderson back. Let's have more Emsler illos. How about a long novel by Leigh Brackett? How does that poor shemale survive in space without some protection for that lovely body? (cover of Mayish) Tell Kelly Freas that I didn't like his illo for THE TEMPTRESS OF PLANET DELIGHT. I guess that is about enough "suggestions" for this time.

In Carol McKinney's letter, she suggested that you list the number of words (approximately) after each story title on the contents page. You said that you did not see any point to it. I know one good reason. Maybe Carol can tell you some more in her next letter. The reason is that some people (unlike an editor) do not have unlimited spare time, and when they sit down to read a STF story, they like to know which stories they can read in the time that they have free.

Incidentally, if you decide to go monthly, don't let me stand in your way. If you go monthly, I'll still buy your mag. (Wasn't that encouraging news, though?)

Best letter goes to Joe Keogh (you obviously thought that he was good or you wouldn't have put two of his letters in one ish.)

Before I crawl back into my hole and stop molesting you, I have one last "suggestion." Why not put the back cover to a better use. Who wants to read about building muscles and radios (especially in an ad). I suggest astronomy photos or something similar.

Adios until the next time that you put out a good issue of PLANET, which I hope will be soon.

Science Fictionally Yours,

PAUL MILLER

GET OFFA DA BED

South Byron, Wisconsin

Gentlemen:

July issue of PLANET just arrived today, and after reading some of the letters in Vizigraph, I should like to put in my few words, too. I am not in the habit of writing letters to magazines about the type of stories they print, etc, so perhaps I am way off base, but I am getting sick and tired of people who write that such a picture or such a story is good or bad, or horrible, or excellent, as they see it. I am wondering how many of these so-called critics ever tried writing a story or drawing a picture. I have. At the present time I belong to a flourishing Writers' Club in Fond du Lac Wisconsin, and while none of us happens to be a science fiction writer, most of us know the hard work that goes into any type of writing, and have a fair idea of the work that goes into painting a picture.

As an avid reader of science fiction, I feel that, whether I happen to like or dislike a certain type of story magazine, there is sure to be some readers who have an entirely different opinion and I say, more power to them. That has always been the American way, and while we may not always agree, we can at least tolerate.

The pictures of half-dressed girls leave me cold. After seeing the way some of our supposedly best-dressed movie stars on T. V. dress, a pretty gal in a space helmet and briefs doesn't scare me a bit.

I only hope that PLANET Stories does not try to improve itself like AMAZING has done—for the worse, in my opinion. I don't care if PLANET is known as a pulp magazine and doesn't look as swank as READER'S DIGEST. For what's inside—I like it. As for me, I don't care whether a story was written by Bradbury or Whozit after I have read it. It's the story that counts. I don't care too much for the mighty space battles, or the gruesome animals in some of the stories; I would like to see a few more women creep in a more homey capacity, and hear a little more about family life and customs, furniture and clothing, as well as different kinds of ray guns and space cars, but still, I am not kicking—I couldn't write one of the things if I had to. Me, I go for poetry and good old Mother Nature type things in my writing, because I know what I can do—but as for reading—well, I can read what I want to, and I like PLANET. More power to it. Long may it wave, etc.

Sincerely,

EVELYN MCLEAN

P.S. If you can read this writing, you're really good —I have the typewriter sitting on the bed and it bounces.

Ed's note: Which is just what makes editors get so bouncy after a spell.

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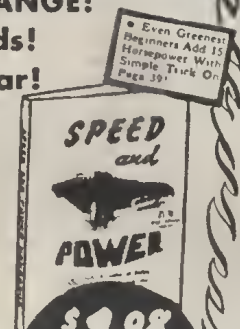

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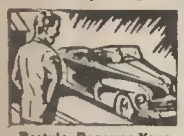

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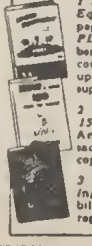

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